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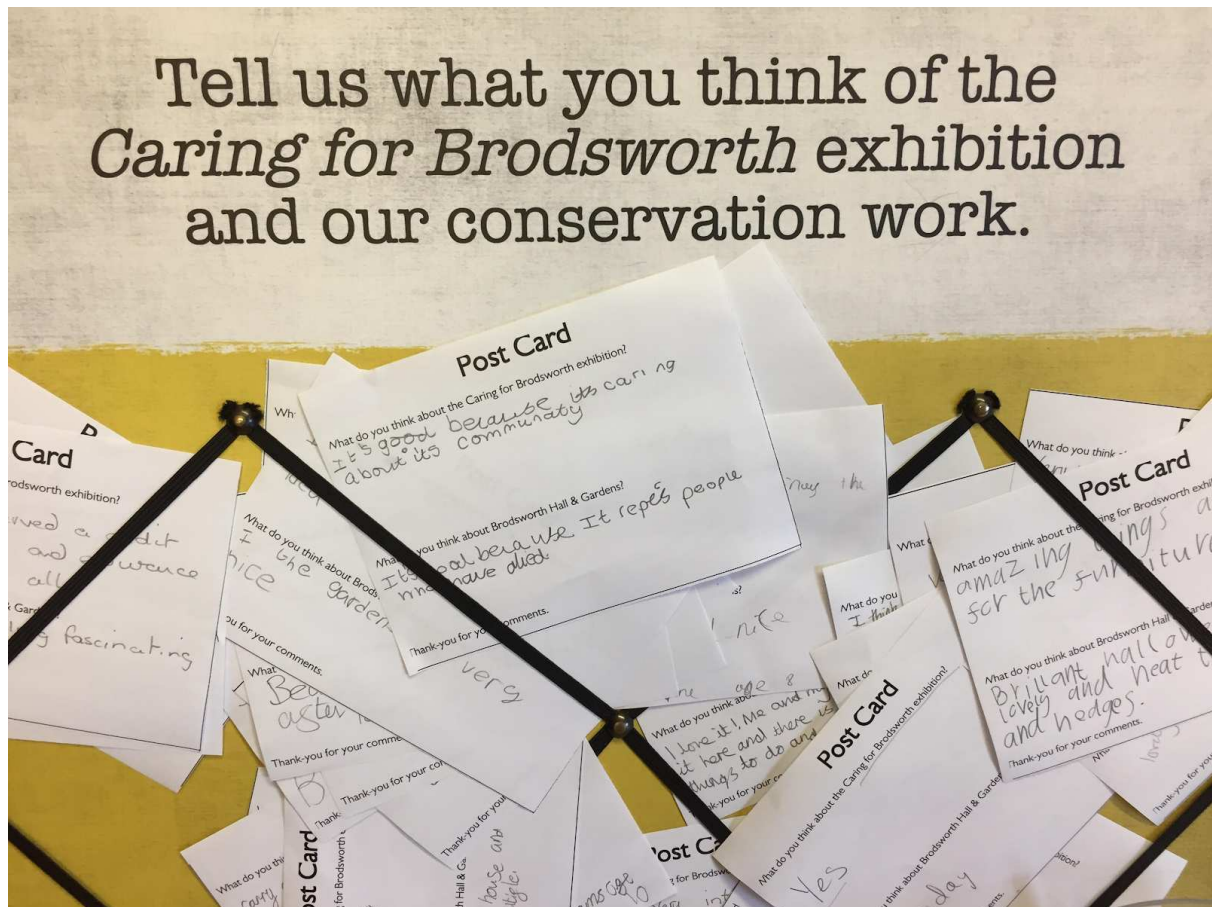
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**Caring for Brodsworth:**  
**an impact study of the 'conservation in action' project at**  
**Brodsworth Hall 2016 - 2017**



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# **Caring for Brodsworth: an impact study of the ‘conservation in action’ project at Brodsworth Hall 2016 - 2017**

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**July 2018**

## Executive summary

During the major building conservation project at Brodsworth Hall in 2016 -2017, English Heritage decided to keep the house fully open with the work ongoing, presenting 'conservation in action' as part of the visit experience. This was complemented by the *Caring for Brodsworth* interpretation project in the house itself. Together they aimed to enable the public to engage with heritage conservation work on the building and its collections and to understand the 'behind the scenes' challenges involved in maintaining and conserving an historic house and its sensitive interiors.

This impact study uses feedback gathered by English Heritage from visitors, data from social media, and interviews with the project team to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot project in terms of the visitor experience and for the staff and volunteers involved.

Overall feedback from visitors' comments is very positive, despite significant challenges with a false start in 2016, and shows an extremely positive reception (98%) of the interpretation and visitor experience of *Caring for Brodsworth*. Reviews on social media are more mixed, as can be expected, but still show 85+% positive responses overall and provide a wealth of detail with which to understand better specific areas of interest, enjoyment and concern to visitors. Interviews with the project team, staff and volunteers highlight the collaborative team-working and flexibility which made the project such a success, and the important role of people - volunteers, conservators, contractors and staff - as interlocutors, animating the project and engaging visitors with its complexities. Their enthusiasm for the project and creativity in meeting its challenges was a key ingredient.

Learning from the pilot identifies a number of directions and recommendations that future projects of this kind should explore: the importance of communication and more initial orientation for visitors; enormous potential for using structured and ongoing evaluation of visitor reception and engagement; scope for extending interactive and participative activities; and for further research into reaching fresh audiences, more accessible opportunities and sustained support for English Heritage's work. The evaluation of this project shows compellingly that wherever *people* are engaged in conservation work, and ready to be observed and give friendly explanation, visitors are immediately engaged and increasingly supportive.

The Brodsworth Hall story includes a unique approach to conservation of its interiors and collections which governs day-to-day decisions, operations and longer term strategic choices. There is scope for an in-depth research project here to explore how this can continue to be developed as a creative part of visitors' experience, actively including them in the fascinating process of *Caring for Brodsworth*.



## 1. Introduction

English Heritage cares for over 400 historic sites and properties open to the public in England. Brodsworth Hall, near Doncaster, is one of a number of its furnished historic houses, a remarkable survival of an 1860s Victorian country house as an ensemble, complete with many of its original furnishings and fittings, preserved in the setting of its landscaped gardens. It passed into the care of English Heritage in 1995 since when 'Brodsworth's interiors have been gently conserved to show how subsequent generations lived with Thelluson's creation, updating or abandoning parts of the house to suit their needs and means' (Carr-Whitworth 2009, 3 ).

A major conservation project for Brodsworth's Victorian infrastructure and interiors was undertaken in 2016 and 2017. English Heritage decided to keep the house fully open while the work was underway and to present this as a 'conservation in action' programme as part of the visiting experience. *Caring for Brodsworth*, as the interpretation project is known, was the first major conservation programme where English Heritage had attempted this kind of presentation for their visitors. It provided opportunities for the public to observe the work going on, to understand the 'behind the scenes' work and challenges involved in maintaining and conserving an historic house and its interiors, and to meet conservators working on the project. Other institutions, like the National Trust and Historic Environment Scotland, have also been experimenting with this approach in recent years and a number of museums have foregrounded conservation practice in exhibitions (Koutromanou 2017) but the results of impact studies of this kind of project are not widely available.

English Heritage believes *Caring for Brodsworth* was successful overall in its aims and has welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with the University of York on a detailed assessment of the impact of their 'conservation in action' programme to make maximum use of this innovative experience and opportunity for future conservation projects. The impact study will use feedback gathered by English Heritage from visitors, data available from social media, and interviews conducted by the researcher to gather the perspectives of those who took part in developing and running the project. The findings will be useful to inform the design of other projects of this kind at English Heritage properties, and to suggest further lines of research which could be developed in the field of public engagement with conservation.

## 2. Aims

The **research aims** of the impact study are

- to gain a detailed understanding of the impact of English Heritage's *Caring for Brodsworth* project on the experience of visitors and on the staff and volunteers involved in it
- to inform best practice guidance from this experience for future projects
- to develop a partnership with EH around examining engagement and access issues as conservation practice is opened up to public gaze and participation



- to explore the scope for wider research questions that might be pursued in future collaborations. For example, to examine how participative and interactive experience with heritage conservation in context can
  - add a new dimension to the way people experience and appreciate their visit to an historic place
  - deepen understanding of what caring for heritage places involves and may change attitudes
  - be designed to increase engagement with different audiences (children, those with mobility or other impairments, older people, families).

### 3. Background to research in this field

Conservation practice at heritage properties – essential to their sustainable future and good condition - has only recently been brought into the visitor experience. Until the last decade or so, building conservation work has generally been hidden behind scaffolding or hoardings, conducted during the ‘closed’ season or by shutting down properties for the duration. Bringing conservation into the public domain as part of the visitor experience has received a mixed reception at Brodsworth Hall, and indeed elsewhere, and raises questions about the value of the experience for the visitor and logistical challenges for curatorial and project management. In the wider conservation sector, outside museums, little consideration has been given to what opening up conservation to public gaze brings, in terms of changes in attitude and understanding of heritage as material culture (changing, vulnerable to environmental fluctuation, scientific monitoring/intervention, the conservation vs restoration debate), nor how to mitigate the negative perceptions of some visitors who view this as an unwanted disruption of their planned visit.

Opening up conservation to visitor scrutiny has been embraced as ‘good practice’ by heritage managers as a positive way to engage the public in understanding the complexity and care with which conservation decisions are made. At an institutional level, it is a means for charitable bodies to show how the donations and subscriptions of their members are used in often-unseen, but important, ways. Viewed by property managers from a different, business perspective, it may be seen as a way of diversifying visiting experience (encourages repeat visits, enlivens the typical ‘country house visit’ experience) and a means of keeping buildings open and revenue-earning while necessary work is underway. Equally for an historic property manager, compounding the disruption of building repairs with the complication of public access during unpredictable and occasionally hazardous works, amounts to a potential nightmare of logistical challenges, bringing an occasionally negative visitor experience with it.

Visitors see this differently and in as many nuanced ways, as feedback, both solicited and unsolicited, shows. The means by which conservation is presented, foregrounded in the visit and management of public expectations are all critical to positive reception and communication.

An overview of comparative studies and literature from related research in the heritage sector provides a context for interpretive discussion of the findings. Initial research in the area has been conducted by the researcher and research students at York (Chitty 2017; Koutromanou 2017).

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Data and analysis

The majority of evaluation data from the *Caring for Brodsworth* project available for this impact study was either gathered by English Heritage (EH), or self-generated by users of social media, before the involvement of the researcher in the project in October 2017. The majority of the data gathering was not designed with a specific methodology or analysis in mind, though it was always envisaged by EH that its reception by visitors would be monitored.

### 4.2 Visitor data

From the beginning of the *Caring for Brodsworth* project, with the start of the main contract for conservation works, EH invited feedback from all visitors. This substantial body of data was gathered on a daily basis from late June 2016 to November 2017 (excluding the period when the Hall was closed from mid-October 2016 – March 2017). Feedback postcards with questions were available for all visitors to complete in the kitchen at the end of their visit to the Hall, and volunteer stewards stationed there encouraged people to leave their responses. The large body of data (c1500 individual 'comment' postcards) and its longitudinal spread lends itself to quantitative analysis, while the qualitative nature of responses to the two open-ended questions also offers potential for themed analysis (Appendix 3.1).

This self-administered feedback was complemented with visitor feedback questionnaires administered by EH staff for visitors in the café in the summer of 2017. Twenty-four of these were completed anonymously. While this number is of somewhat limited in value for quantitative analysis the open comments do give some useful insights into visitor experience (Appendix 3.4). The archive of feedback cards and survey questionnaires (loaned for transcription/ scanning) is held by English Heritage.

Feedback and comments on social media - TripAdvisor, Facebook and Twitter - are also available online and these offer a more mixed, and in some ways richer, set of comments than the self-administered feedback cards. Reviews and online posts have been transposed into Excel spreadsheets for analysis with the other data (see Appendix 3.2 and 3.3).

### 4.3 Interviews with staff and volunteers

To contextualise the visitor data outlined above, the researcher conducted eleven, in-depth interviews with key individuals (EH staff, volunteers and contractors) involved in the project in different roles, to gain their insights into the impact of *Caring for Brodsworth* and perceptions about lessons learned from the 18 month project. The methodology and discussion guide for the research interviews was approved by the University of York Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee and the documents provided to participants are reproduced in Appendix 2. All transcriptions from the 7 hours of recorded interviews are anonymised and, where quoted in this report, are cited using the participant code as e.g. 'Int-3' (see Appendix

2.4 for transcripts). Full transcripts and recordings are held in the project archive, together with the files and spreadsheets containing the transcribed data.

## 4.4 Analysis and themes

The evaluation of data for this report is approached as follows:

- quantitative and qualitative analysis of the **visitor data**, using coding to group occurrences of keywords and common perceptions. This allows themes to emerge empirically from the comments posted by visitors and using frequency to assign some relative significance to clusters of similar views and perceptions.
- structured analysis of the **interviews** based on the key questions to all interviewees. This directed them to think about specific aspects of the project's organisation and outcomes but also allowed discussion to flow along lines that opened up in the course of the conversation.

The analysis therefore moves from high level, mixed methods dealing with data that is more generalisable to the qualitative, detailed narrative experiences of staff and volunteers. These two strands have been brought together in the Discussion (section 7). This takes the form of an 'impact pathway' through the *Caring for Brodsworth* project from its inception in the planning stages to the outcomes in visitor and staff experience.

Following a concluding meeting to reflect on the project outcomes with the EH curatorial team at Brodsworth Hall, further discussion is planned with English Heritage to consider the future approaches to impact evaluation and possible future collaboration on other English Heritage property conservation projects.

## 5. Analysis of Visitor Data

### 5.1 Visitor feedback cards

Comment cards are arguably one of the most commonly used visitor feedback mechanisms employed in market research and in the heritage sector. They provide a simple tool capable of delivering immediate, continuous feedback, to help quickly gauge the reception of, for example, a new exhibition or a new aspect of interpretation. Throughout the *Caring for Brodsworth* project (late June 2016 to mid November 2017), English Heritage gathered feedback from visitors by means of feedback 'postcards.' In all, a total of 1624 cards were collected: their contents provide a substantial data set that was transposed into a spreadsheet for analysis (Appendix 3.1). 'Spoiled' cards, and those on which children had simply drawn pictures, or there was simply no comment on the visit itself, were not included. This reduced the total number of feedback cards for analysis to 1457, spread over two seasons. That number equates to around 1% of Brodsworth's total visitors over the same period so, although it is a good-sized sample, its interpretation necessarily has to be considered with caution including any inherent biases.

Feedback cards were completed by adults, by adults on behalf of their children, and directly by children. Although cards were gathered anonymously, it was possible to distinguish the large number written by children (936 feedback cards, 64%), whose answers typically include their age, christian name and drawings. Around a third (484, 33%) of feedback cards were evidently completed by adults and 37 (2%) were uncertain.

Visitor comments were categorised according to whether they were wholly positive, constructively critical or negatively critical. The large majority of these **responses (98%) reflected positively on the conservation work (1338)** or made more critical, but informed and supportive comments (89). A small proportion, only **30 responses (2%), were negatively critical.**

Overall, this indicates an extremely positive reception of the interpretation and visitor experience. However, the value of this feedback collection method for evaluation hinges significantly on the way the feedback instrument is designed and also on the delivery at the feedback point. In this case, for example, some positive bias could be accounted for by the presence of a room steward present in proximity to the feedback point, and the public nature of the posting of comments. Visitors were clearly influenced by what they could see others had written, even referring to points that had been mentioned on other feedback cards, for example 'I agree with the comment on one of the other slips that the recipe book, should be printed' (card #953, June 2017).

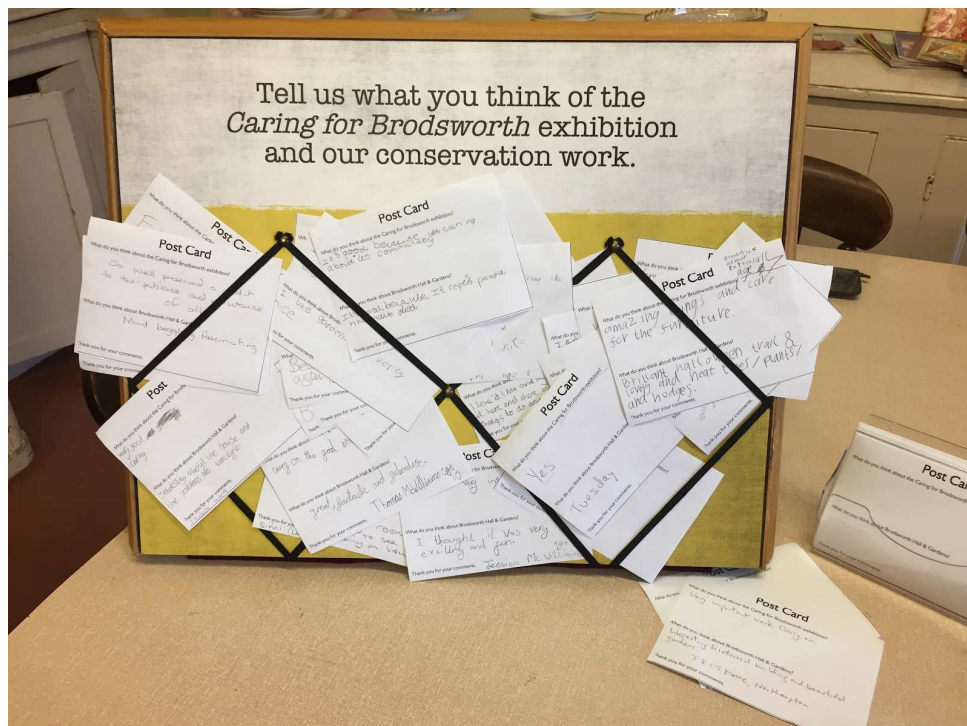


Figure 1: Visitor comments were invited at the end of the visit to the Hall in the kitchen.

Visitors were asked the following two open questions on the feedback cards:

1. *What do you think about the Caring for Brodsworth exhibition?*
2. *What do you think about Brodsworth Hall & Gardens?*

The open character of the questions was designed to give visitors freedom to express a wide range of views about any aspect of the interpretation or their visit to the property. In their responses, many visitors ignored the distinction between the questions and gave very general feedback about their visit in one paragraph written across the whole card, or they chose to situate their answer under one question and not the other. Typically many visitors used the first question to talk generally about their experience of the house, and then the second section to talk only about the gardens. For example, one visitor answered the first question with 'The people working here are very knowledgeable. Their facts are brill' and the second 'I'm not really a garden person but my friend thinks they are awesome' (card #1224, August 2017). Children in particular seemed to struggle to understand what was being asked of them and, given that nearly two thirds of responses appear to have come from children, this may have been a missed opportunity to design a second, more creative feedback format that was more child friendly.

Overwhelming the majority of cards conveyed rather simple, generally brief comments - particularly those written by children where comments were distinctly vague and generic e.g. first question answer "it was good", second "lovely" (card #1113, August 2017) and first answer 'good', second answer '[name] age 4 (card #633, Winter Season 2016). Where children did write more, however, this was often thoughtfully-framed and meaningful and some of these examples are quoted below.

Having considered these limitations, there is nonetheless a rich sample of visitor feedback here, spread over the two years of the project. From the longer qualitative comments, seven common themes were identified using frequent word and phrase occurrences and also informed by themes that came out of the interviews with staff and volunteers. Themes were colour-coded in the spreadsheet text boxes, which allows ready visual analysis and can assist in seeing patterning where certain themes co-occur (Appendix 3.1).

#### **5.1.1 Appreciation of staff and room stewards (orange code)**

The contribution to the visitor experience made by interactions with staff and volunteers is by far the most frequently occurring theme (130 cards, 9%), not just in the comment cards but also in TripAdvisor reviews. Evidently, their contributions to the overall visitor experience and success of the project is central and cannot be understated. There was very positive feedback in recognition of the hard work of the staff and volunteers e.g 'the dedicated care by those employed and who are volunteers is evident at every turn during our visit (card #780, April 2017) and 'wonderful to see how well cared for the house is. The family atmosphere is enduring and the love that the volunteers have for it is infectious' (card #788,

April 2017). The part that room stewards play in engaging visitors was evidently central to the experience: 'Visit made all the more enjoyable by the knowledge and interest of the volunteers in each room' (card #42, July 2016).

#### **5.1.2 New insights gained from the visit (dark blue code)**

Comments suggesting that new insights were gained from the visit and mentions of changed views were found in 71 cards (5%). It was clear that many people really appreciated being given a glimpse into the processes of conservation and seeing the range of work involved in conserving a property of this magnitude: 'Great to have an insight into your work - have never considered how much work goes into caring for Brodsworth! Thank you' (card #36, July 2016). Knowing that their membership/entrance fee was being used to facilitate work such as this was also viewed positively. The language in these comments tended to use terms like 'care', 'special' and 'respectful'.

It was particularly encouraging to see how many of the comment cards featuring this theme came from children, for which this project appears to have been particularly thought provoking: 'I really enjoyed learning about how you care for old houses. I love coming to Brodsworth and hope that all the bugs and mites will go so I can always enjoy this beautiful house. [name]' (card #342, August 2016). These new insights and understandings are evidently aided by the use of knitted 'bugs' as an interpretive tool, as evidenced in many of the comment cards from both adults and children alike, which mention the bugs as one of the defining memories of the visit: 'please keep the knitted bugs - brilliant, I now know what they look like' (card #118, August 2016) and 'it is interesting seeing that bugs eat the house!' (card #491, October 2016).

#### **5.1.3 'I'll visit again when it's finished' (pink code)**

Comments about how the house will look good or better when the work is done, or that the visitor will come back to see the house 'when it's finished', occurred on 62 comment cards (4%). Interest in this, as one of the more frequently occurring themes in feedback, was also highlighted by staff (see below p. 36). One of the planned outcomes from the conservation project is that there should be no discernible change in the appearance of the house interiors once the work is complete. The potential concern for English Heritage is whether visitors have formed certain expectations of what they will see on a return visit. Comments such as 'I look forward to coming again and seeing the changes' (card #122, August 2016), 'it would be nice to see everything when refurbished' (card #709, April 2017), 'Can see end result will be stunning' (card #965, June 2017), 'intriguing to look at, just wud like to see it wen it is fully reddy' (card #179, aged 10, August 2016) are suggestive. It might be argued that the interpretation messages about the aim of the project have not been successful - i.e. understanding the difference between conservation and restoration - and yet such comments are often linked to discernment about this distinction and the overall aims of the project. In many cases it is clear that visitors are looking forward to being able to see the house as a whole, with all its rooms open, on a repeat visit or they are simply intrigued to know how it unfolds as a project: 'Fantastic to see 'process' rather than outcome and will



be back next year to see how you've got on' (card #783, April 2017). Clearly it could be problematic if expectations were followed by disappointment, but future interpretation could be designed to mitigate against this and to re-emphasise what has actually been achieved once the project is complete.

#### 5.1.4 Interest in 'Conservation' (green code)

Informing about the difference between conservation and restoration was a significant theme in the interpretation for the project but was not always evident in the usage of these terms by visitors, for whom the distinction was less important or perhaps less clear. The two usages were considered separately in the analysis to see whether this revealed any insights into the impact of the interpretation on thinking about this.

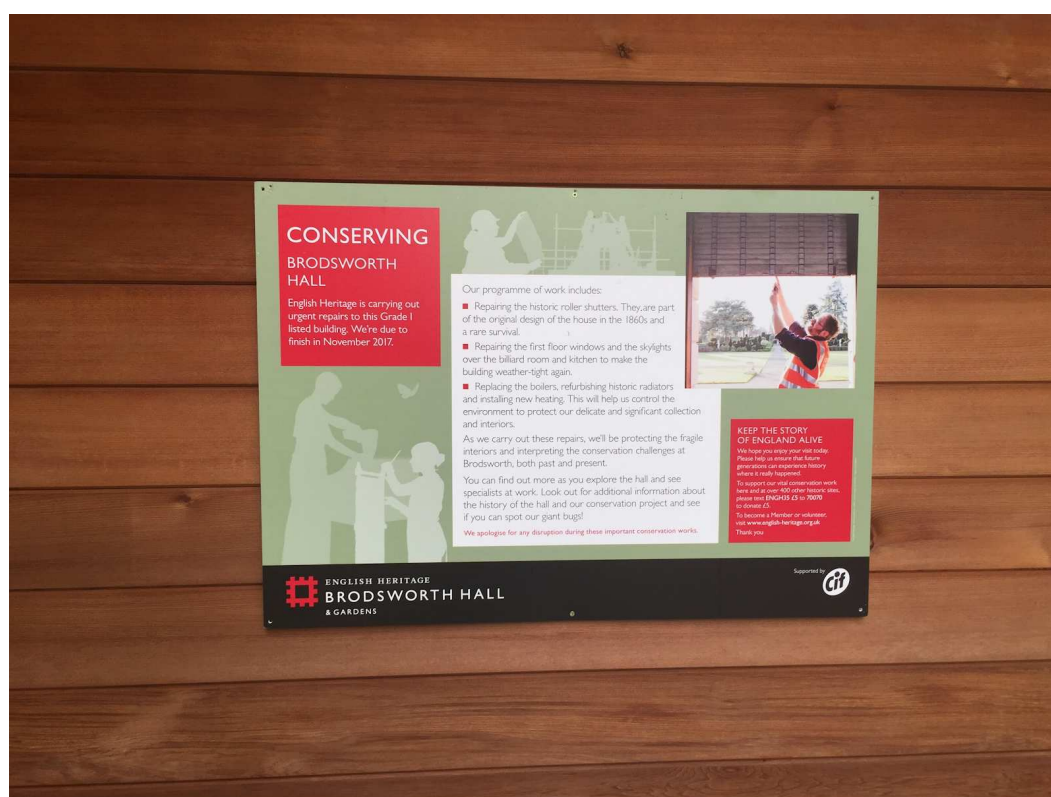


Figure 2: Conserving Brodsworth Hall introductory panel outside the visitor reception point.

Mentions of 'conservation' or 'conserve' were found in 44 comment cards (3%). Those that did specifically mention conservation often demonstrated a deeper and perhaps more personal understanding of what the project was about and interest in the work ('interesting', 'good', 'great' and 'amazing' were the commonest descriptors) :

- Excellent example of conservation. Great to see generations of patina & alterations for each age. Don't over renovate. Lovely volunteers in house & garden" (card #37, July 2016)
- Brilliant - there's more here to explain conservation than I've seen in any other museum or property. (card #347, August 2016)
- Really interesting - really good to see conservation rather than restoration" (card #909, June 2017).

Frequently observations referred to seeing ‘behind the scenes’, comments on the skills and complexity involved, and the insights gained ‘into the way English Heritage operate. Conservation is complex I’ve learned’ (card #477, October 2016 ).

#### **5.1.5 Mention of ‘Restoration’ (red code)**

Mentions of restoration or of ‘restorative work’ were found in 28 comment cards (2%). For example ‘it was very interesting and I enjoyed learning about restoration’ (card #1165, August 2017). The use of this term varied significantly, from a comment on ‘the fact that it hasn’t been restored is what’s made it so special’ to interest in new knowledge about ‘the cost & processes of restoration, & the philosophy of your presentation which is a distinctive approach to returning the house to [its] "glory day"’. Some visitors used both terms interchangeably and others made a clear distinction: ‘I don’t understand the conservation of 70’s decor? Also I feel some of the rooms need restoration’ (card #137, August 2016). Further discussion of how this dual terminology is applied by visitors continues below (see 5.2).

#### **5.1.6 Reflection on the presentation of ‘authentic’ heritage (purple code)**

Reflections on authenticity, originality or honesty in the way Brodsworth Hall is preserved and presented were found in 43 comment cards (3%). It is apparent in these that the conservation narrative used in the presentation of the house is viewed by many visitors as part of its appeal, and something that sets Brodsworth Hall apart from other English Heritage properties. Many go as far as to caution English Heritage not to ‘over restore’ the property, which would diminish what is viewed as part of its charm:

- The authenticity of the house & contents make it very special; however you 'improve' the visitor experience, make sure you preserve the authenticity (card #287, August 2016).

#### **5.1.7 Negative responses to the conservation work in progress (light blue code)**

A tiny proportion of feedback cards (19, 1%) mention being unhappy about the conservation work going on with the house open to the public; or that it is not good value for money. The majority of these (14) were written at the start of the *Caring for Brodsworth* project in 2016 when no conservation work had actually got underway within the hall, yet large parts of the house were still closed off behind hoardings. This is reflected in comments such as:

- impossible to appreciate the fine spaces with all the hoardings. Consequently very poor value - entrance fee is on the top side - what about a discount whilst the screens are in place? (review #14, June/July 2016).
- Why not put the items in perspex boxes so that we could still see them whilst they are being protected? Esp the billiard room - such a shame you can't see anything’ (review #521, October 2016).

It seems that there was also less interpretation and information available to inform visitors in advance at this stage, for example on the website:

- It should be publicised that the whole place is in such a dreadful state! (card #194, August 2016).



- I feel you should inform people that much of the house cannot be viewed \*before\* charging them £10 entry fee (card #447, September 2016).

The number of negative comments of this kind appears to reflect dissatisfaction in a very small proportion of visitors. The presence of stewarding staff and visibility of comments to others may perhaps have deterred some from expressing critical views.

### 5.1.8 Overview

Overall, these common themes in responses are supported by a relatively small proportion of cards in quantitative terms, despite the impressive number of feedback cards collected. This is largely due to the dataset being dominated by very brief comments, many written by children. One aspect of the general character of comments is the very limited reference to specific aspects of the interpretation. A 'stand out' feature was the knitted bugs (38 mentions and mainly by children); but 'Friend or Foe' and 'Victim' interpretation labels, for example, were mentioned less than 5 times. The work on the Victorian roller shutters was a central focus for the conservation work but received no mentions. Encouragingly, however, 1 in 10 visitors in the sample engaged in a general or specific way with the central themes of the project and for many it was a fascinating, even revelatory, experience.



Figure 3: Interpretation about pest control and enjoyment of the 'knitted bugs' trail was mentioned specifically by visitors.

Although the qualitative data potential of the cards is also somewhat limited by the brevity of comments, it highlights some important themes for the evaluation. These are developed

in the following section where TripAdvisor reviews for Brodsworth Hall and Gardens provide a richer qualitative reflection on the visitor experience of the project.

## 5.2 TripAdvisor

The development of the Internet and Web2.0 technologies has seen a rise in the number of online travel forums and review sites. These in turn have become an important and expanding data source, harnessed by academic and market researchers, to give a unique first-hand insight into the experience and motivations of the visitor. The self-generated content of travel platforms such as TripAdvisor provides an immense qualitative data set of over 225 million individual reviews, with 139 new contributions being added every minute (Jamerson 2017, 120). The site was launched in 2000 to provide internet users with ‘unbiased’ reviews in the form of narrative content, headed by a reviewer title and rating (1-5 stars). There appears to be a somewhat unconstrained and even verbose freedom to online reviewing, that offers an alternative perspective to the bias inherent in on-site visitor feedback collection methods, where the gaze of the researcher, or organisation, collecting the responses is felt more keenly. Yoo and Gretzel (2008) suggest that people write feedback online for a variety of reasons including but not limited to: enjoyment and positive self-enhancement, venting negative feelings/collective power, concern for other consumers and helping the company or organisation (p.292).

As part of the visitor data analysis for this impact project, TripAdvisor comments posted at [https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction\\_Review-g187067-d213501-Reviews-Brodsworth\\_Hall\\_and\\_Gardens-Doncaster\\_South\\_Yorkshire\\_England.html](https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Attraction_Review-g187067-d213501-Reviews-Brodsworth_Hall_and_Gardens-Doncaster_South_Yorkshire_England.html) were searched for the period from late May 2016 to November 2017, and those with specific reference to the conservation works and *Caring for Brodsworth project* were extracted into a spreadsheet (Appendix 3.2). There were a total of 343 reviews during this time and 155 (45%) reviews mentioned the conservation work and aspects of the ‘Caring for Brodsworth’ interpretation.

Visitors’ general reflections were often focused on the gardens, with a large number of review titles referring solely to the ‘beautiful gardens.’ The content of many reviews is largely, sometimes exclusively, dominated by this reflection, often without any mention of the Hall. A number of visitor reviews expressed their wish to see a garden access only ticket made available, particularly whilst works are ongoing. It would also appear that some visitors were initially deterred from entering the house at all as they believed it was “closed seemingly for renovation” (review #1, May 2016).

Reviews that referred to the conservation work and interpretation were categorised according to whether they were wholly positive, constructively critical or negatively critical. The majority of these reviewers (84%) either reflected positively on the conservation work or made more critical, but informed and supportive comments.

84 reviews (54%) were categorised as unambiguously positive and often spoke about the particular themes of the interpretation and the value that the stewards and staff - and their enthusiasm - added to the visit. Positive comments on the conservation experience often co-occur with appreciative comments on the stewards' contribution, suggestive of an important relationship:

Two of us visited Brodsworth Hall for the first time and were very impressed by the house and its gardens. Keen staff help you enjoy your visit and offer information about the house its history and former inhabitants. The house is undergoing restoration and presently the unique wooden window blinds are the next to be restored. The interior has a lot to offer and the grounds and gardens too are attractive. Certainly worth spending a few hours here (review #27, August 2016).

TripAdvisor reviews often mention more specific details about the visit (as on the shutters above). While a proportion are critical, in a constructive way (47, 30%), they offer useful insights into reservations visitors might have about the experience and, with their thoughts on what could be improved, are generally supportive.

The gardens are beautiful with different sections well maintained. The house is undergoing repair but there are a lot of room open and it is easy to see what life was like there. We are English heritage members so it was free. We spent an hour each on the house and gardens. At its current state of renovation, it might not appeal to those looking to visit a 'stately home' (review #65, September 2016).

24 reviews were negative (15%) and commonly relate to misunderstanding about the conservation work in progress and the number rooms closed off; and occasionally to misleading information on the English Heritage website.

The website of the house did not reflect what is on show there or when it opens which was very misleading. We arrived to be told that the house would not open until much later than advertised and then told that we were wrong in our interpretation of the website - the main and mobile websites gave conflicting information and as most people use the mobile website nowadays this was very poor by EH standards and the customer service staff member inferred that we could not read a website! (review #56, September 2016).

While 24 negative reviews is still a relatively low percentage (and only 7% of TripAdvisor reviews for Brodsworth Hall overall in the period concerned) it represents a significantly larger proportion of negative feedback online than found in the feedback card comments. This supports observations noted earlier (p.11) with visitor feedback cards being more susceptible to a positive bias and online reviews generally being more mixed. The length of many of the online comments and their detailed reflections on the visit were notable and also more nuanced than the generally brief comments written on the feedback cards at the end of the visit in the Hall itself.

Some limited demographic data was also available to be collected from the reviewers' TripAdvisor profiles, where they had the option to disclose their gender, age range and

geographic location. From this information a small number of distinctions became evident. The first is that the majority age bracket of those who commented on the works were the 50-64 years old range followed by the 65+ category. Secondly, where reviewers had chosen to disclose their location this data was used to determine whether they could be classed as 'local' or not. For the purpose of this analysis, 'local' was defined as visitors from a location of less than 30 miles from Brodsworth (this data could sometimes also be sourced from the review content itself where locality would often be mentioned). Analysis found some correlation between whether a visitor was local and whether the review that was left was positive, critical or negative.

Those reviewers that identified as locals (and often therefore repeat visitors), and also those who disclosed that they were English Heritage members, on the whole gave much more positive reviews. The motivation here could be linked to the fact that for English Heritage members, entry to the Hall is free and therefore the impact of the works may not have affected them as strongly in terms whether their visit was regarded as 'value for money'. Equally English Heritage visitors also appeared to be better informed about conservation and more supportive of the work the charity does in caring for its properties. Local visitors also have more opportunity to visit again and, possibly with pride in their local heritage, are motivated to promote the property to other potential visitors. This correlation between positive feedback and membership/locality is further revealed within the content of some reviews themselves, where visitors made the following observations:

- We live within easy travelling distance, and will no doubt return (being EH members), but had our journey been longer, I should have liked notice (on the website, perhaps?) that parts of the house are inaccessible/not viewable at the moment (review #95, May 2017).
- This was our first visit and, as life members, we all had free entry. I think we would have been very nonplussed if we had paid full price but were unable to see much of downstairs due to the massive work being undertaken (review #97, May 2017).
- We are English Heritage members so a return visit does not involve us in additional entry cost and we will definitely come back to see the results of the renovation (review #99, May 2017).

The richness of the TripAdvisor data as a source for qualitative reflection on the visit was unexpectedly relevant and only a limited analysis of this has been possible in this initial study. The same coding themes were applied to this data as used for analysis of the feedback cards, and no additional new themes emerged from the open review comments.

The dialectic around **conservation and restoration**, which emerged as a concern from staff interviews, was again examined closely, as understanding the careful approach taken to conservation, and its rationale, was a focus of the 'Caring for Brodsworth' interpretation. 'Restoration' of the house is referred to in 57 (16%) relevant reviews compared with

‘conservation’ which occurs in 44 (13%) reviews. But it is worth noting that reviewers often refer to the works without mentioning this specific terminology at all and might use terms such as ‘renovation’, ‘repair’ or ‘preservation’ for the project or discuss in more abstract terms of ‘authenticity’ and ‘honesty’ reflecting an understanding of the ethic that underpins the Brodsworth approach, as seen in the feedback cards.



Figure 4: In the Dining Room, visitors are invited to observe the challenges of conserving deteriorating historic furnishings and fabric.

Often ‘restoration’ and ‘conservation’ were used interchangeably, with one reviewer occasionally using both words to make the same point:

The house was quite impressive inside with all the features and antiques but it will look much better once the restoration work is complete. The tour guide discussed interesting facts about the history of the house as well as the ongoing conservation efforts (review #149, September 2017).

This is suggestive that the term restoration is therefore not being used pejoratively by many nor with the same technical understanding that a heritage professional or specialist might employ.<sup>1</sup> Rather it would appear that the terminology that distinguishes the two in conservation practice is not necessarily meaningful for the majority of visitors even when it has been explained. ‘Conservation’ is generally seen as the activity or process and

<sup>1</sup> Restoration is defined in Historic England’s *Conservation Principles* as ‘To return a place to a known earlier state, on the basis of compelling evidence, without conjecture’ (Historic England 2009, 72)

‘restoration’ as the end result but without necessarily assuming that the latter means substantial renewal of fabric or removal of later accretions.

A small number of reviewers did make a point of differentiating between the two:

- Not forgetting the aim is conservation not shiny restoration’ (review #96, May 2017)
- I think several of the reviews miss the point of the house being open during 'renovations'. This is really 'conservation in action' which gives an insight into how these great houses are cared for (review #106, May 2017)

Equally a handful of reviews also cite this as a missed opportunity to ‘restore Brodsworth Hall back to the day when it was first built’ (review #49, September 2016).

The **contribution made by staff and volunteers** to the visitor experience is clearly evidenced in reviews and, as with the feedback cards, is the theme that appears most frequently (60 reviews, 39%). A smaller number of reviews (23, 15%) also refer to the **authenticity and honest** display of the property in a positive manner with the consensus being that the conservation narrative selected for this house is appropriate and appreciated.

As with the feedback cards, it was again positive to see that reviewers reflected that they had **changed views or had gained new insights** from their visit, particularly when it came to understanding how much work is involved in conserving a property such as Brodsworth (referenced in 22 reviews, 14%). 31 reviewers (20%) made comments relating to the fact that they believe **the house will look better when the works are complete** and that they will return to see the finished result:

- while the house is in the process of conservation there was still a lot of interest and we can't wait to go back next year to see the finished result (review #108, June 2017).

This theme, as discussed in section 5.1, could be problematic if visitors are unable to discern any change upon their return visit. However, such comments should be interpreted cautiously. Rather than expecting the Hall to appear dramatically changed by the conservation programme, in some cases reviewers are clearly referring to being able to see the whole house open again: ‘I now understand the difference between restoration and conservation. A wonderful day out. I will return when the rooms are available to the public’ (review #48, August 2016).

Finally 33 reviews (21%) mentioned **negative feelings** relating to value for money and disappointment caused by work going on while the house was open to the public.



- A disappointing visit. The house was shrouded in covers and full of renovation materials. The smell was of decay and very offputting - so much so that I needed to exit and did not venture upstairs - although one staircase was blocked off anyway. There was no warning given to us about this!...I understand that the upkeep of such a place must be very costly. Nevertheless people want value for money and, today, we didn't get it (review #25, July 2016).

As with the visitor feedback cards, these comments are particularly prevalent in the first few months of the *Caring for Brodsworth* project in 2016, which is unsurprising as, until the following season, there was limited interpretation and no conservation work had actually started. A persistent thread of such comments continues, however, throughout both seasons and more so than in the feedback card comments. The visibility of past reviewers' negative comments on TripAdvisor may account for this to some extent, possibly prompting others to contribute similar opinions despite the very different experience for visitors in 2017.

### 5.3 Social media: Facebook and Twitter

The exponential growth of a social media landscape within recent years has also had an impact on the heritage sector, arguably in two main aspects for this study. The first relates to how heritage organisations use online platforms as a marketing tool to promote their sites and events, and the second - specially relevant here - to how visitors use it to share their views, recommendations and experiences. Social media sites provide a platform for users to share information, where collaboration and communication is actively promoted, thus leading to the creation of a virtual community and a cache of user-generated content (UGC) that can be analysed.

Social media was used by the *Caring for Brodsworth project* to publicise project milestones and to highlight a variety of collection care tasks as they were scheduled. The Twitter and Facebook pages for Brodsworth Hall and Gardens each offer something unique in terms of promoting this project, and also in the way that visitors can feed in their responses. Facebook has the largest reach with over six thousand likes, and the Brodsworth page has a feature which allows visitors to leave reviews of their experiences.

Comments left on both platforms were again searched for the period of late May 2016 to November 2017, and a total of 57 reviews with specific reference to the conservation project were extracted into a spreadsheet (Appendix 3.3). The same range of themes were evident here as in other visitor feedback. The positive/ negative tone of the reviews was nonetheless more mixed than in the feedback cards and similar, in terms of the balance, to the TripAdvisor reviews with 34 positive reviews (59%), 14 critical (25%), and 9 negative (16%). However, what is particularly interesting is the interactive element of Facebook posting, in short the ability for users to pass comment on other visitors feedback, sometimes sparking debate amongst users. An example of this can be found in replies posted to this review on the 16th April 2017:



*'Visited yesterday. Gardens were OK but charging full price when the house is virtually inaccessible is not reasonable. While I understand that the work is vital, it was really impossible to get any pleasure from viewing the hall. There are massive wooden boards up to protect the areas being worked on but even the rooms which were open were sadly being used as storage for all the displaced furniture. Would have been much more honest to close the building during the renovations and just have a reduced charge to visit the gardens. Having travelled an hour specifically to visit Brodsworth we felt very let down. It should have been made clearer on the website the extent of work being undertaken. Sorry to say but we won't be making a repeat visit.'* (review #13, April 2017)

Figure 5: Facebook posts from April 2017.

This 2\* review encapsulates the near whole range of issues that most visitors seemed to find with the project at the beginning of each season, e.g. charging full price while the conservation works are ongoing, not offering a garden access only ticket, the shock of lots of giant wooden hoardings, and the extent of the work not being made clearer - particularly on the website but also at the ticketing point. These are all points with negative connotations that have been mentioned multiple times by visitors on all platforms. The issues raised in this review undoubtedly struck a chord with other visitors, as this single review generated a further 9 comments from other users in response. The majority agree with the comments made, but there are also those that show more sympathy and understanding of the necessity of the project and suggest English Heritage membership as a worthwhile cause and to achieve value for money:

*I do know what you mean, however Brodsworth is such a unique place and actually the work they are doing is vital to protect the building and it's contents. It is worth joining EH, we are rolling members and we get our money back within a month. They have tons of events on too. We love the place.*



There is a growing body of literature evaluating the impact of social media, travel forums and user generated content (UGC) upon the heritage sector, reviewed recently by King, Stark and Cook (2016). For other sectors, Bowen and Baloglu (2015) have analysed the management implications of this open communication and publishing of feedback online for organisations, particularly within the hotel industry. They acknowledge that UGC has given the consumer a powerful voice. This can be problematic when a problem occurs and visitors take to their keyboards to make the world aware of issues with the organisation's operations. One answer, they say, is to monitor social media to help negate the impact of negative posting as quickly as possible to restore confidence and alleviate any concerns that this may generate for other readers: 'This open communication is beneficial to well-run businesses' but can be 'bad news' when resources may not be available to manage it actively (Bowen and Baloglu 2015, 315). The absence of any explanation or response to a critical or negative review can be damaging, and does not go unnoticed by visitors, as demonstrated by one user who commented 'sad to see no response from Brodsworth' on the previously mentioned review. In actual fact, 25% of the reviews (16 / 57) did generate a response from the Brodsworth Hall and Gardens page, and 4 of the 9 negative reviews received a reply in this way. Where a response was offered, and a dialogue opened between the organisation and the visitor, many seemed placated simply by English Heritage acknowledging their concerns:

**Review:** *"Lovely place. Shame a lot of it can't be seen at the moment, but I will be returning once they've finished the refurbishment"* (review #7, April 2017).

**English Heritage reply:** *Hi [name], thank you for your review. The conservation project which we have ongoing at the moment should be reaching its conclusion towards the end of the year. We made the decision to keep the majority of the house open during the project so that our visitors can see the works which are ongoing. Our conservation teams are currently working hard to maintain the house for future generations and help stop any deterioration to the fabric of the building. We hope that you visit us again soon and you can see what we've been up to :-)*

**Reviewer response:** *Myself & the wife loved it. Very much looking forward to seeing it completed :)*

It is unclear why some visitors reviews received a response while others, particularly some of the most negative reviews, did not. Capacity to monitor the site may be very limited at times. A low number of responses from English Heritage is also evident on TripAdvisor where just two reviews received a reply, with no clear reason apparent as to why those particular reviews exclusively generated a response.

The interactive features of Facebook in particular, which allow the host page to easily respond to user concerns, appears to have encouraged an online community that expects and sometimes demands a response. One review posted on the 23rd July 2017 to the

Brodsworth page, although not related specifically to the *Caring for Brodsworth* project, demonstrated this expectation of a response: 'Beautiful place which we have visited several times, spoiled by the rudeness of the staff in the shop on entry...I look forward to your response on this matter.' It is not surprising then that more and more human and financial resources are now being invested in social media marketing. For Brodsworth Hall, responsibility for managing project-related posts on Twitter and Facebook was built into the role of a collections care assistant from February 2017.

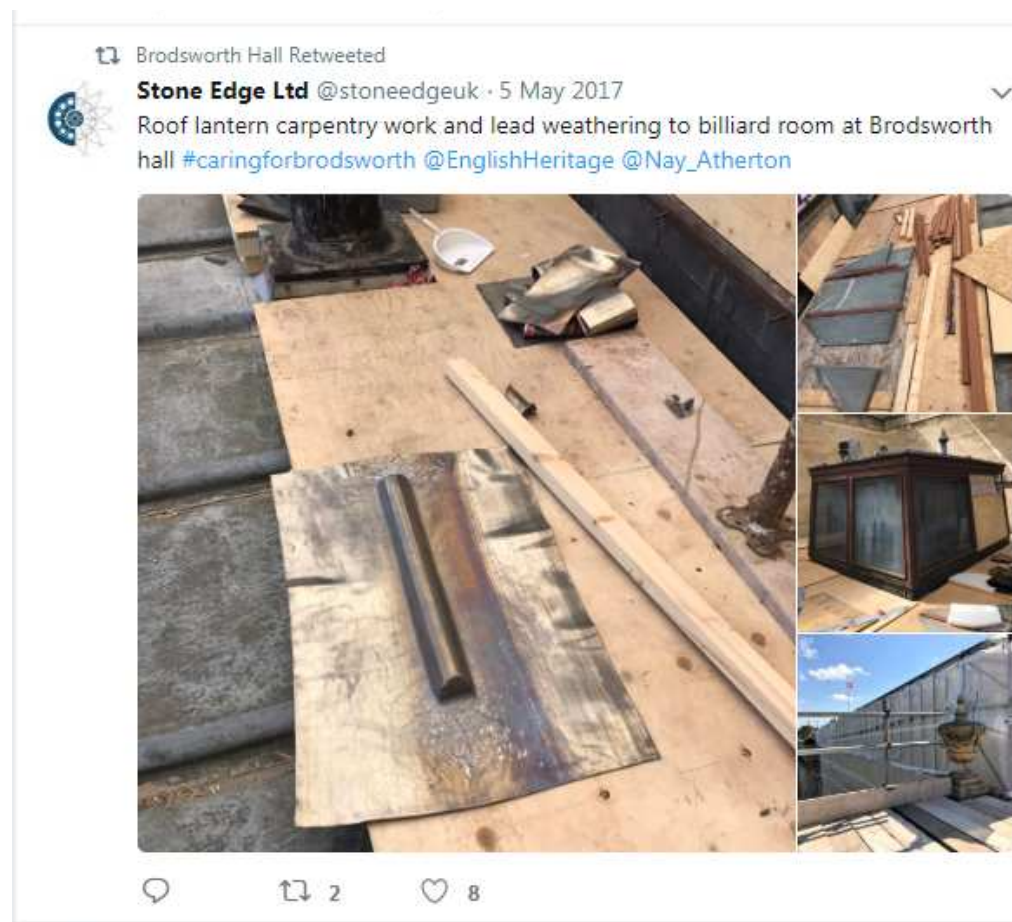


Figure 6: Tweet from the Brodsworth conservation contractor, retweeted #caring for brodsworth, May 2017

While there is much less to say in terms of user generated content, Twitter offers a different dynamic again. Having only been set up in February 2017 the page has currently attracted 425 followers. Twitter has been used to promote upcoming conservation work that visitors may be interested in seeing during the course of the *Caring for Brodsworth* project. Posts relating specifically to the conservation project are easy to find for those interested under the hashtag #CaringforBrodsworth. 16 posts under this hashtag were generated by the Brodsworth Hall and Gardens Twitter page whilst other contributions had been added by members of the project team and contractors such as Stone Edge and Hare & Ransome, which offer an alternative viewpoint of the project. The successful use of this hashtag could

also have been implemented on the sites Facebook page, to group project related posts in an easily accessible way.

Links to related English Heritage blog posts, and short videos were also shared, as were links to articles and clips about the work in the Yorkshire Post.

During the project we saw some brilliant growth across social media channels... followers appreciated the consistent posting schedule, as well as the behind-the-scenes conservation information that we hadn't posted very often before. I found that people didn't really want to interact on our posts, but we did get many views, likes and shares - showing that people were reading and appreciating the content... People really love timelapse videos and we started ensuring we made time lapses of as many activities as possible... such a good record of how much work is involved to complete even the simplest conservation task (pers. comm, Collections Care Assistant).

Twitter was also used to show case the project through an increasingly popular phenomenon - the twitter conference, in this case hosted by the Institute of Conservation (ICON).



*Figure 7: Brodsworth features in ICON's Twitter conference, October 2017*

Social media can clearly provide powerful and growing tools for managing and augmenting the visitor experience on site at an historic property. This brief analysis of its use at Brodsworth shows the real potential for informing visitors before, and even during, their visit; for building a following for the project 'story' over time (encouraging repeat visits); for sharing positive visitor experiences, and for turning any negative ones into a positive relationship. As suggested by recent research, there is substantial, untapped potential to better understand the experience of users by harnessing the data that is already available to heritage institutions, but which organizations frequently do not have the resources to exploit (King, Stark and Cooke 2016, 77).

## 5.4 Visitor feedback survey conducted by English Heritage staff

The final section on visitor data is a brief review of a survey questionnaire administered by English Heritage staff in the summer of 2017 (Appendix 3.4). The small number of surveys (24) does not allow reliable quantitative analysis but this is the only body of data gathered that allows some correlation between visitor experience and 'conservation in action' activities.

It asks well-framed questions about the impact of the project on visitors' motivations and engagement, on how well they feel they are informed about English Heritage's work, what they saw happening on the day and whether the experience encourages them to donate to support EH projects. Some indicative inferences can be suggested.

Visitors who were not local (50+miles away) tended to be those who responded most positively in open comments and acknowledged the conservation message. A visitor who saw 'chandelier cleaning work' commented 'Very interesting to take a focus on conservation of historic materials' (survey #4). Another who had talked to a member of staff while she was cleaning was reported as saying 'Really nice that we're open during works. Don't make it too perfect. They like that we're conserving, not restoring!' (survey #23)

Visitors who had seen 'conservation in action' activities on their visit indicated they felt very much better informed and had found the interpretation very engaging, though there was not a strong correlation between this and positive open comments. The final question about donating suggests the *Caring for Brodsworth* experience could encourage a majority to donate to support English Heritage's work and that doing this on site - i.e. it is place-sensitive - was favoured.

With a significantly larger body of survey data along these lines, there is clearly significant potential for more nuanced feedback to complement other more general sources of visitor feedback. This aspect of impact assessment suggests a number of future avenues for further research.

## 6 Interviews

Eleven interviews were conducted at Brodsworth Hall in October 2017, during the final stages of the conservation programme, and took place either at the property or at the English Heritage office in York. Interviewees included two volunteer room stewards, two historic properties stewards, the project conservator, regional project manager, property manager, properties curator, assistant curator for art, collections curator, and contractor's site manager. Transcripts are provided in Appendix 2.4.

Interviewees were asked about:

- their role in English Heritage and the project
- their understanding of the overall aim of the project
- how they had been able to gauge its success and whether changes were made as the project developed

- common responses they had experienced from visitors and any interesting or unusual reactions
- the most successful (with visitors) and worthwhile aspects of the project
- anything they would think about doing differently in a project of this kind in the future, based on their personal experience.

In mixed methods research, the frequency of identified themes in responses is noted and can be significant, but the qualitative aspect of the analysis offers potential for a small number of observations – or even a single response - to illuminate and provide insights in the field of enquiry. While this section continues discussion of some of the areas of commonest responses, it also looks at aspects of the visitor and ‘conservation in action’ experience that staff and volunteers perceived as remarkable or distinctive in other ways.

Participants were not given prompts towards any specific type of interest and drew attention to aspects that stood out for them or were relevant for their roles. For some themes in the responses, relevant extracts from the interviews – too numerous to include below – are gathered in Appendix 2. The analysis below uses participants’ own words as far as possible to illustrate their experience, enthusiasms, specific issues, and voice their sense of the overall outcomes of the project. It provides a rich narrative and discursive account of the project’s impact from multiple perspectives.

## 6.1 Understanding the overall aim of the project

All interviewees showed a clear sense of the project aim and concept from their professional perspective and that the driver was essential maintenance and repair. ‘We have to do the conservation works’ to deal with ‘the conservation backlogs that... have developed over the last twenty years since we’ve opened to the public’ (Int-2; Int-4).

Conservation work to the shutters, roof lanterns and environmental controls were foregrounded:

...it was all about the shutters.. a massive issue for conserving the interiors.. and then environmental controls... the lanterns were a huge issue, because they’ve been leaking for several years.. M&E, particularly the heating, boilers (Int-3).

A strong ethos about the distinctive aims of the project came through comments from staff:

So we haven’t restored it, we haven’t transformed the way it looks. We’ve made it weathertight and got it working and ... and when we open next season, it won’t look that much different [but] I do feel like we have explained to people how much planning ...just the amount of work that goes on that isn’t glamorous and it isn’t front of house (Int-5).

The idea of presenting ‘conservation in action’ was integral to the final project and from early on in the planning developed in a creative way within the team, taking the initial concept and seeing how it could be adapted to the reality of keeping the Hall open to the public with the work going on. Across the project team there was a consistently expressed, core understanding of why the conservation project was happening, what it aimed to do and how the interpretation would support this.





*Figure 7: Introductory panel welcoming visitors:  
'We want you to experience the work as it is happening...'*

The twin elements were, firstly, an interpretive scheme planned to engage visitors with the work of preventative conservation and maintenance essential for the future of the Hall and its collections; and then the 'conservation in action' opportunity for visitors to interact with the conservation work itself during the project.

We started talking about it a long time before we did anything and the scope of the project changed quite a lot in that planning process... The 'conservation in action' elements of it was not its core aim at the beginning... It's something that our project team has seen the sense in pursuing, and thought 'well, if this is a pilot project then let's make it special, let's do it differently' (Int-5).

The aim was to do it in such a way that not everything was closed or shut off at the same time and then there would still be an awful lot for people to see; and that we could explain it in a way that made it more exciting for visitors. So that they could kind of get to the heart of the house, and know the care that needs to be put into the house equates to the care of the collection and that the two go hand in hand. (Int-4)

For this project we had decided to keep the collection in situ [with] a rolling programme of decant and reinstallation, and we try to do as much of the project as we can, in front of the public. Just by default by keeping a house open, we may as well celebrate what we are doing rather than shut the doors and not involve people. (Int-1)

There was some initial scepticism and concern about adopting this approach and sensitivity to possible effects on the experience for visitors. This was expressed both by volunteer stewards and from the commercial and marketing side of the organisation:

The decision obviously was made to keep the house open to the public... we knew that we were going to have a challenge on, keeping them interested or explaining problems... to be fair when it was first announced ... stewards, we were very sceptical of it working (Int-8).

...there was some nervousness from the historic properties side of things, so the commercial arm saying 'oh my goodness, we're going to have to open up a site here. We're not going to reduce the entrance fee, but people are going to see works going on. Is the visitor offer going to be anything like what it is at the moment?' (Int-5).

## 6.2 Gauging the success of the project

*Caring for Brodsworth* was a new initiative and a pilot project. Many of the interviewees gave a real sense of it being experienced as something of a journey of discovery.

...we've managed to undertake the critical works we needed to do for the improvements and we've also managed to take people along on the journey with us.... (Int-1).

The positive contribution of the contractors to its success was highlighted by most interviewees, 'the importance of having a contractor who is open to doing things a bit differently, and who was just very, very supportive from the beginning' (Int-5). The performance of the team as a whole was seen as an equally important element in its success: 'our teams are brilliant.. on site, conservators, everyone's supporting each other and site staff have been brilliant...contractors and their subcontractors... volunteers' (Int-3).

From the start of the project there was a conscious intention to assess its reception by visitors, using 'comment cards.. a good way of telling if people liked it or not' and sharing the comments with the team and managers:

They're at the very end of the visitor route where less of the project work is happening. But it's whether all of the interpretation - the exhibitions and things that we've put in – how much [of that] people have remembered and know by the time they get to the end' (Int-4).

Conversations with visitors talking to volunteer stewards and staff, were noted as valuable ways to gauge responses in an *ad hoc* way but the comment cards provided a more systematic view of reception.

As the year has progressed [comments] have been much more positive this year than last year [2016] because people have been actively able to see workmen and see more staff members, and talk to us about the project more (Int-4).

Room stewards also noted the progressive engagement: ‘people, throughout the year, have got more and more interested and the displays that were introduced in 2017 filled a lot of the gaps in that we didn’t have in 2016’ (Int-8).

Others also commented on the interactions with people being particularly effective and meaningful and developing over time as the project got underway:

Whenever we have done actual conservation works that our team have been directly involved with, people have been really interested and have purposefully come and asked questions (Int-5).

Talking to visitors... they’ve caught the fascination of what goes on behind the scenes (Int-9).

Staff who had experienced visitor complaints and disappointment with rooms being closed highlighted less successful experiences and found it difficult to assess the success of the projects at times:

Most [visitors] you could talk round and they’d take it in their stride. Occasionally ... no matter, you could tell them chapter and verse, it’d make no difference, they were quite unhappy (Int-10).

It was horrible last year when nothing was happening, that was very difficult... trying to explain to people why things weren’t happening (Int-11).

Project meetings were used as a regular opportunity to review feedback from social media alongside direct visitor responses at the Hall:

We all attend those.. [and] that has been a means of us finding out what the visitors thought... [and] social media being ever present... Some of it was just negative, ... people just weren’t interested in what they were seeing... but then there was an awful lot of really positive feedback (Int-5).

There is a real sense of staff and volunteers reviewing and reflecting on the visitor experience throughout the project and making incremental adjustments in response to this as is discussed next.

### **6.3 Changes introduced as the project developed**

The Brodsworth Hall conservation project has faced some unexpected challenges over its course (June 2016 - November 2017) which inevitably also impacted on the way the *Caring for Brodsworth* interpretation for public visitors developed. All those involved had to deal with change at various points, sometimes from week to week, and described the ways they found to accommodate this.

The first unexpected event to which the team responded was in June 2016 when - having been through a lengthy tendering process and appointed the principal contractor - the building company went into receivership. ‘The day after they started on site, I had a phone call from a third party and they said “your contractor is about to go bust”...so I was mentally prepared... We ended up having to go out to tender again, which lost us about four months of the programme (Int-6)’.



We had a whole season [in 2016] where we were geared up for a project and it looked as though a project was happening, but it wasn't! (Int-4).

As planned originally, the works schedule would have finished by March 2017: 'we would have got all the simple rooms done over the summer, and they would have been our learning curve' (Int-6). Work on the more complex and sensitive parts of the Hall would have taken place over the winter when the house was closed. 'But as it was, our more complex showrooms had to be done over the summer [in 2017] which meant this rapid learning experience' (Int-6).

Not unnaturally in the circumstances, there was some cautiousness about marketing: 'We were a bit hit and miss, I think, in getting that message out there to visitors'.

At the beginning perhaps we weren't bold enough on the marketing side. So the website had a little bit about the project on it, but a few months down the line we realised it needed to be on the opening page...now it does have a whole page about the project with various links to what's been going on, to Facebook and so on (Int-5).

The unintended 2-year life of the conservation project did, however, offer an opportunity for things to be reviewed and adjusted: 'We had the chance midway through, when the second year started, to alter things... increase the amount of interpretation,... this year it's been much better because visitors have actually seen workmen doing things and we added more interpretation panels, more things for children' (Int-4).

Communicating with visitors about what to expect on their visit during the conservation project at the Hall was, however, still a challenge in terms of managing reactions even in 2017 and 'to get that message across down in the visitor centre as well':

a lot of people were saying they weren't actually aware of the conservation project before they got to the site, [and] the extent of works weren't mentioned when they were actually paying the fee. So they were coming up and opening the doors to see, in effect, what was a building site... We sorted out some posters, leaflets to hand out, but there was a delay getting those... once we got past the first three months of the [2017] season ...it did get easier. We definitely had to be quite flexible (Int-2).

Conveying the 'what is conservation' message and 'what is restoration' message was a focus as the project progressed and in the new interpretation introduced later, 'making sure that message is coming through' (Int-6):

Certainly in the second half of the project, we were very much putting that message out across social media and in the new interpretation that were put in. This is conservation, it is not restoration. (Int-6).

As the project proceeded in 2017, the team also responded rapidly to changing opportunities 'in a very kind of natural way' as building works were rescheduled, or overran. The dynamics of the team and their ability to respond and work together were important factors.

It's not been a totally structured process, we did trial engagement days, but sometimes actually getting people to be in the space at the time, doing the thing they're meant to be doing, has not been the easiest thing to do...(Int-1).

The timeframe has just not worked to plan, like for the shutters for example.. certain rooms that have overrun.. it's obviously just finding that balance and making it work (Int-2).

The biggest things we've had to deal with are classic conservation type project issues. You open something up, you don't really know what your opening up, and then it changes, and it's going to take longer than you expected, or its out of sequence or things like that (Int-6).

If the house had been closed, you would have just got on with it and it wouldn't have mattered so much. But because the house was open to the public, that's constant work with operational requirements- that has been a really, really key level of communication. (Int-6).

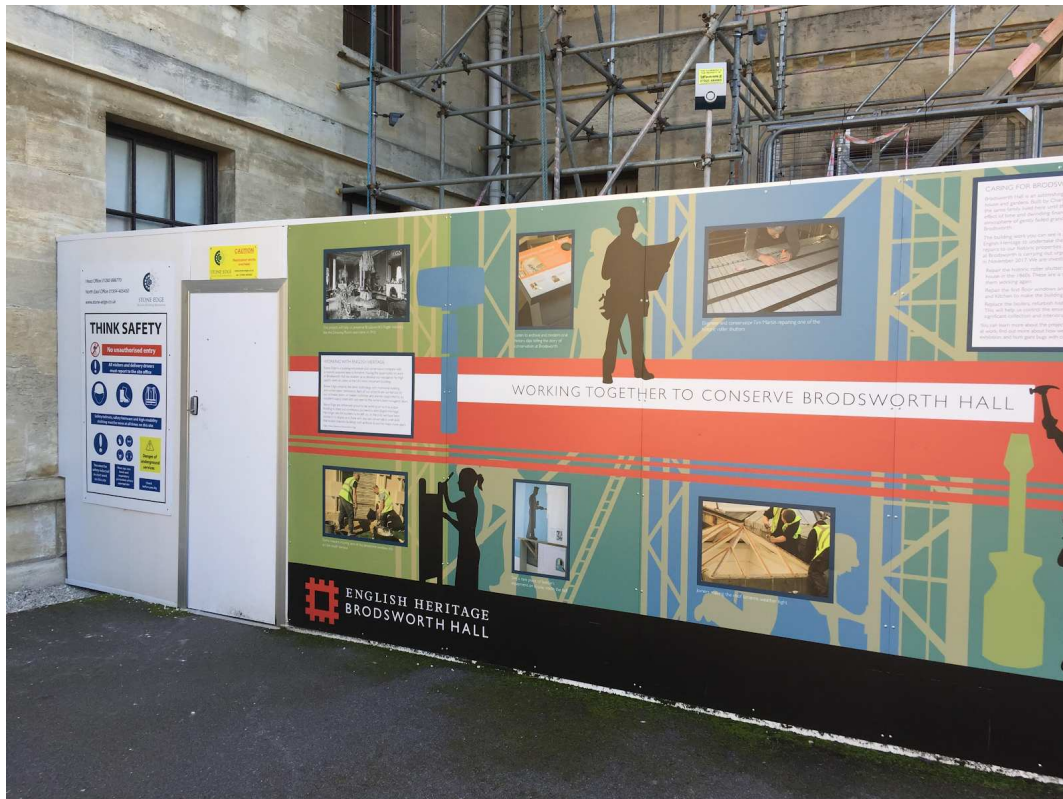
There was an increasing confidence in letting visitors see whatever was happening and recognising opportunities to do even 'more of the actual conservation treatment in front of the visitors':

When we first started... it was always our intention to do bits and pieces but, as the project developed and we knew where we were with budgets, we really pushed ... to get more conservation in action happening within the visitor season (Int-5).

An example was the team decision 'to clean the chandeliers whilst we had space, because we knew it would be a massive draw for visitors and practically it made sense as well; so that cost us nothing but it was a real draw... people gathered round the scaffolding chatting away' (Int -5).

Room stewards, interacting directly with visitors, commented on how they managed to keep up with the variety of different activities going on and to stay abreast of changes, once the project started properly. With works to the shutters, the textiles, carpets and soft furnishings, the lantern windows, central heating, 'there was always plenty for us to do' (Int-8). Others highlighted that, though interactions are different with every visitor, in this project it had been particularly 'constant change' with 'more and more to talk about in the places where the work is still going on, but less where the rooms have been done... so you roll with the programme' (Int-9). They also emphasised the difference it made 'once we got panels out at the front... [and] a big panel out the back in the tea room courtyard' (Int-11).

For the contractor, an important change as the project progressed into operation came about through 'the interaction between the vision [of what should happen] and the actual tradesman' brought in for the job, finding inventive, technical solutions to 'achieve something that's unintrusive, tidy, that's probably unseen to the untrained eye, that's the important part' (Int-7).



*Figure 8: Interpretation on hoarding outside the tea room introduces the project and the conservation team.*

#### 6.4 Common responses from visitors

Comment cards from visitors at the end of their tour of the house give a very positive set of perspectives, and the perceptions of staff on the ground about responses to and during visits are similarly positive. They say that visitors generally found it ‘interesting to see things going on’ and the view is that overall the majority of visitors ‘have really enjoyed it’, been ‘very, very positive’ (Int-1, Int-2, Int-4, Int-6, Int-8, Int-9).

The involvement of the volunteer room stewards was seen as critical to ensuring positive responses and reception by visitors: ‘communication is key, especially the volunteers [who] need to know what’s going on’ (Int-2). ‘Talking about conservation’ became the focus for conversations with visitors. Volunteers remarked that until the project started, they would talk about the family to tell the story of the building but ‘with the conservation work, it’s been more about the building [and] how we conserve it to tell the story’ (Int-9):

Just that explanation really, understanding what’s going on and why it’s actually happening, talking to staff... those little stories, like with the shutters, as soon as you say to people ‘we haven’t been able to open those shutters since English Heritage took over but now we’re going to be able to’... (Int-2).

When you talk to them face to face, people understand it more and they understand the need for it. (Int-4)

It did a tremendous amount to make [visitors] realise just how expensive and difficult it is to maintain a house like this in the state it's presented and they were totally, totally amazed. (Int-8)

The reactions I've seen have been very positive and very intrigued, that's the surprising one, they're so intrigued by what's going on. (Int-3)

The commonest reaction without doubt was fascination. "Never realised that this happened and never realised... that needed to be done constantly". ... Little things that people have learned, that they've picked up on. So, far the most common response has been fascination. (Int-9)

Talking directly with the specialists doing the conservation work also evidently engaged people, 'seeing the contractors here doing the work' (Int-3):

I've seen the joiners doing repairs while visitors have been walking around, watching and asking questions. That was really nice, they seem to respond to seeing stuff happening.

Being able to talk to an expert... people really wanted to talk to the people doing it and they got a lot from that and also from just being closer to the objects. (Int-5)

Being able to see people working... my tours only last half an hour or so but if you've got one of the [conservation assistants] working in the rooms and you can actually see someone doing something.. sometimes I couldn't get them away. (Int-10)



*Figure 9 : Conservation staff working on re-installing collections and furnishing in the South Hall using historic photographs and able to interact with visitors about their work.*

The fact that tasks were routine or relatively 'mundane' ones (for a conservator) did not seem to matter: 're-hanging the Lawrence in the dining room drew quite a big crowd... you may never have thought how many people it takes to hang a picture of that scale because it always happens behind closed doors' (Int-5). Opportunities to see regular conservation cleaning during opening hours were popular, like for the books in the Library and the chandelier cleaning.

Staff were also aware of social media responses and, for those not working directly with visitors, this was a primary source of gauging visitor response. On the whole, this was also seen as 'generally speaking very positive' but staff showed clear sensitivity to the nuancing of messages in social media, and on site, and their effect on the way visitors experienced the Hall.

We wanted to make no apology that they were walking in to a building site and the message was always about "this is where your membership money goes", you know, "you bought your ticket, this is where your money goes". It's about conservation work... (Int-6)

The perceptions of negative responses from visitors were very significant for some staff and volunteers, even though the numbers of complaints were relatively small on, for example, TripAdvisor (above p.18 ).

We took criticism on board... But then there was also an awful lot of really positive feedback via social media which we weren't always being told about. It was the complaints we heard more about. But then that's understandable, isn't it? (Int-5).

This was particularly an issue in the first season when the project contract was halted and there were months of delay: 'it was horrible last year when nothing was happening, that was very difficult' (Int-11) . Preparatory works like protective floor coverings and hoarding were in place, and sensitive items like sculpture and furnishing had been removed or covered. 'As they came into the Hall, you could actually see [visitors] taken aback and confused':

Most you could talk them round and they'd take it in their stride...You've got to put them on the right foot as they come in at that front door, as you meet somebody, you've got to change their views (Int-10).

We had nothing visible happening in the house ...so trying to explain to people why things weren't happening, that was tricky. ... [visitors] were coming back and telling us that they wanted their money back because half the house was closed... I just don't think they were expecting it... (Int-11).

Clearly staff in front line roles were dealing with negative responses commonly, while feedback from the majority of visitors who were positively engaged with their experience (as the comment cards and social media show) was rarely being expressed to them directly.

## 6.5 'We'll come back when it's finished'

'We'll come back when it's finished' was an aspect of visitor response noted by most of the interviewees. The concern was that the distinctive approach to conservation at Brodsworth, leaving the interiors 'as found' as a unique ensemble, and gently managing repair and stabilisation, rather than renewal of its fabric and collections, may not be appreciated by visitors.

As explained by one of the project team, 'the intent with the project is [to show] the invisible works that are hard to explain to visitors: when it's finished we shouldn't be able to tell that anything's been done, but everything will be in a much better state for the house and the collection' (Int-4). Project participants had concerns around this, however, because of possible visitor expectations next season, that 'people are going to be coming back and expecting... some grand reveal.. you're not going to be able to see any big changes, other than the fact that we can open a few more shutters' (Int-2).

What we don't want is complaints next year – 'what have you spent all the money on, can't see that, etc'....This is conservation, it is not restoration. I think professionals struggle with that concept so how we expect the general public to really understand it is difficult. (Int-6, Int-5)

Unfortunately some people are going to come after this work's finished and expect us to have decorated right the way through, new wallpaper and paint, and they will be very disappointed, and then you've got the other people who... get it completely... the regular ones, because they understand and they've seen how it was before. (Int-10)

About 75% of Brodsworth's 75-80,000 visitors are English Heritage members or repeat visitors, likely to return at different seasons. Feedback from all sources indicates that the project appealed particularly to them. During 2017, however, the number of paying visitors significantly increased, though it was suggested 'a lot of that's possibly down to the gardens as well as the house because we've had a lot of publicity recently, winning awards..' (Int-2).

Members of the project team described how they responded proactively as the project progressed, writing 'blog posts on the EH national blog page about conservation vs restoration.. and various things on Facebook and Twitter to try and inform people about the project' (Int-4) and to manage expectations. Repeat visits as a positive response to the ongoing project were noted:

Visitors that have said 'this is the second time, we came back later because we knew there would be more to see in the inner hall and Dining Room, that was all boxed in the first time we came' ... so people have [come back] to follow the progress of the project. (Int-9).

A couple last week who said 'we came three months ago and wanted to see what was going on now'. (Int 11)

During observational visits for the project, as a visitor, the researcher talked with several visitors who were on repeat visits and who informally explained how the works were progressing and why, with impressive knowledge. As one steward remarked 'we've had people that come regularly who have found it *more* interesting because they come regularly so they always see the same thing and this has been different' (Int-9).



## 6.5 Interesting or unexpected responses from visitors

### ‘What’s behind there, what am I missing?’

In the initial months of the project, the entrance hall and other areas were largely boarded off to protect vulnerable finishes and interior features. Initially there were ‘no observation windows in [the hoarding] because it was not expected that people would want to see inside them’ (Int-5). The first impact ‘as people walk in with areas covered up in hoarding, was potentially quite shocking’ and according to interviewees was planned intentionally because ‘it tried to get people out of the mentality that they’re visiting a country house’:

‘they’re visiting a conservation project and they are allowed into the project and we’re sharing the project with them’ (Int-4).

As others pointed out, however, for an unprepared visitor the initial feeling might *not* be one of a shared experience but of being excluded in their first encounter with the Hall’s conservation: ‘people kept saying “*well, what’s behind there, what am I missing?*” ’ (Int-5). Several participants commented on this being particularly the case in the first season of the project, when interpretation at the ticketing point, and staff training and awareness, were not yet as developed as they would be later. After the first few months, observation windows in the hoarding were added at various points to respond to visitor reactions, with time-lapse photography of the lanterns repair works on the roof in the Kitchen and Billiard Room introduced in 2017. More introductory material was provided on the website, and posters and panels were introduced on site, and a large interpretation board outside the tea room (Int-4, Int-5).



*Figure 10: Observational windows in the protective hoardings were opened up in the entrance hall later in the first season to give visitors a sense of what was being protected behind them.*

There is evidently a natural curiosity for visitors to know what they might be missing while conservation work is underway, and also to see activities that are not usually visible and shared with visitors. The project team described how they responded creatively to this, seeking additional budgets to augment the original interpretation plan (Int- 6) and devising creative and practical schemes reflecting their

own interest in interpreting their work:

I made more interpretation, like engagement panels, with pieces of the shutters. Because at first I didn't understand how they worked, so I drew diagrams of the mechanisms and made a new display out of that...Rather than it just being a historical interpretation, I wanted that to be a very hands on. (Int-1)

Learning what an operational conservation programme 'can do for the interpretation, visitor experience side' was singled out as 'the biggest thing in the project' (Int-6). Many also commented on the way in which the interpretation 'developed over time' reflexively in response to visitor interest and opportunities as they arose, continuously evolving through the project (Int-6). With hindsight, 'we would have allowed for different things each month' (Int-6) but overall, as is clearly documented in the interpretation timeline in Appendix 1, the team was agile and quick to adapt to new opportunities. Some of the particular outcomes noted by interviewees follow below.

### Knowledge exchange

Interactions through the project brought together people working for English Heritage who, while in the same team or working on the same project, might not usually have exchanged their experience and expertise.

A volunteer room steward talked about the specialist conservator for the shutters: 'I was fascinated, I was talking to him for the best part of 40 minutes... the amount of information he could pass on to me which I didn't know about, I found it fascinating' (Int-8). Equally the exchange of knowledge flowed the other way when a conservator was working on shutters in the library and asked the steward about the wallpaper: 'it was my job to look after the library at the time...and 40 minutes later I'd given him the history of the room, and the paper and the problems etc and what was done in 1990...' (Int-8).

With visitors, conversations about 'Caring for Brodsworth' introduced information about practical conservation measures that many said they had never considered.

People hadn't actually thought about the fact that we have heating on in summer, in hot weather, and we have no heating on in winter when it's cold [because] in summer when it's humid we need to keep the air dry. In winter, when it's cold and the air's dry, we don't need the heating. (Int-9)

Through stewards talking to visitors, 'an awful lot of them have caught my fascination... caught the fascination of what actually goes on behind the scenes', was one observation, which was clearly reflected in visitor feedback comments about having 'learned a lot' too. Again, the process is two way, stewards themselves have 'learned more about the project as different rooms have opened up or different bits of work have been done' and then transmitted this in dialogue with visitors:

When the carpet started being cleaned... you take a whole new tack and you go onto carpets and fabrics and textiles. Prior to that you have been talking about structure, the windows, the roller shutters, so the story grows, evolves... The Drawing Room always gives room for conversation about conservation. (Int-9).



The attention of visitors to detail was also noted, 'they began to look at the house more closely'. Room stewards gained the impression that visitors were spending more time in the house as 'more people began to look more and more closely'; and that they were spending a longer time in certain rooms, also spending more time talking to stewards and to each other (Int-8).

### Interpretation highlights: 'the knitted bug trail' and the 'conserving the shutters'

Two aspects of the interpretation were singled out in interviews as particularly engaging: both were included as part of the planned interpretation from 2016.

Knitted 'giant bugs' were positioned in a trail around the house and used to explain 'insects and pests in country houses' and the conservation effort to keep them under control.

One of the unlikely success stories of the interpretation was our knitted bug trail [produced by 'a star team of volunteer knitters'], which has been fantastically successful... that's produced some exuberant responses from children. (Int-4)

The 'knitted bugs' feature prominently in the visitor feedback but interestingly was mentioned little by most of those interviewed, compared for example with the shutters. Similarly the oral history recordings used in the interpretation - 'our shutters contractor, we spoke to him and other people who have worked on the shutters in the past and things like that (Int-4)' - was rarely mentioned in interviews or visitor comments but is likely to have added to the overall engagement experience, though how much is hard to gauge.

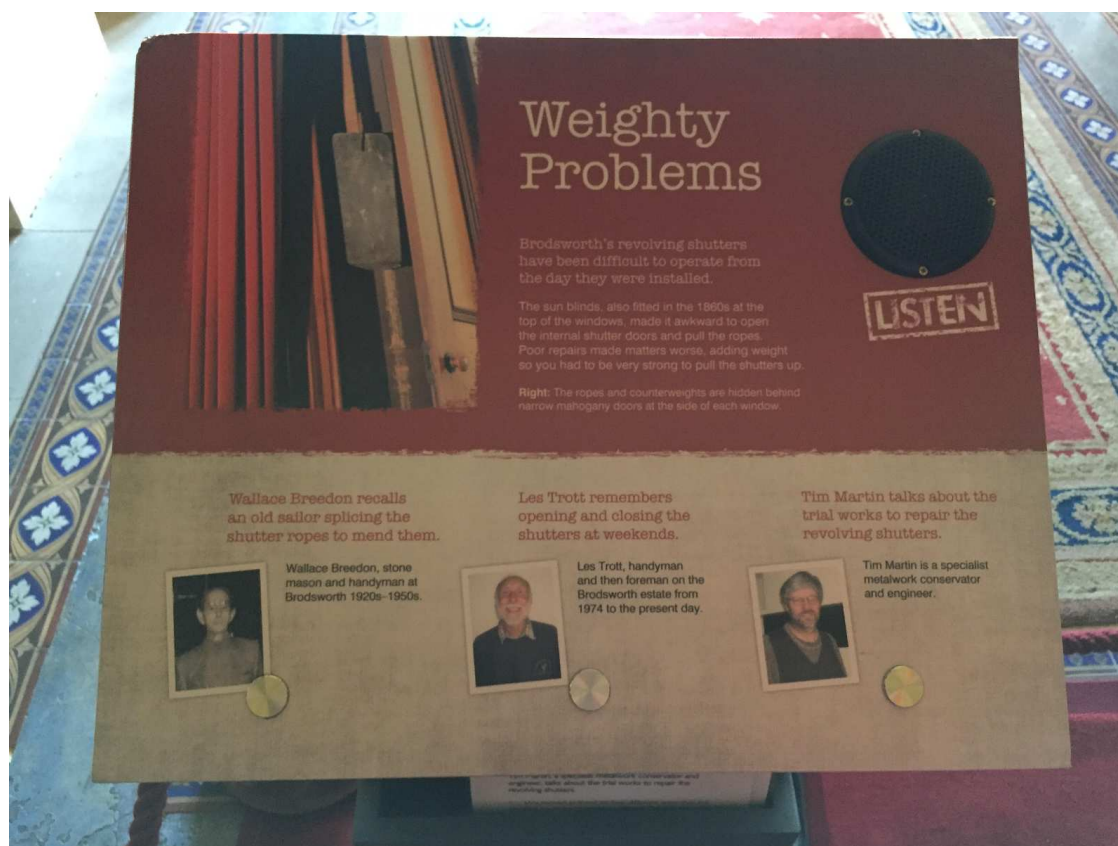
The mechanical roller shutters, installed for the windows on the major ground floor and reception rooms of the Hall in the early 1860s, are a distinctive visual, and unique, feature of the property. In most cases these had been unusable or broken for a number of years and they were a key element in the conservation project. Work on them was preceded by a feasibility study and a lengthy internal debate over how they should be conserved which had arguably delayed the start on other works for a protracted period (Int-3). Most interviewees commented on the positive visitor response to the way this conservation work was communicated, accessible and promoted successfully: on the website, YouTube, in articles, through on-site interactions with the conservator, and in the use of an audio recording of him talking about his work.

The conservation engineer ...would be working in the rooms reinstating the shutters, he is very knowledgeable and so someone will come in and they'll make an observation and then [he] will then spend 10 minutes talking to them, which, for them, that's probably not what they were expecting... And then when the next people come in they join in, so again it's that natural feel, and it's very interactive. And it encourages people to talk amongst themselves even as well (Int-1).

Exhibition panels about the roller shutters were installed for 2016 but apparently it was 'quite hard to grasp the concept unless you've actually been into a shutter box and looked at them'. For the following season, therefore, 'we did a little display on one of the hoarding walls with shutter sections .. so people could actually see the internal workings and they can touch them if they want to, they're kind of sacrificial... that's proved so successful.. we're actually retaining that, even when the project's been closed' (Int-4). It is something of a paradox, given the effort placed in interpretation and the evident engagement with the

window shutter repairs observed on site, that visitor feedback does not reflect this and shutters are very rarely mentioned though they invited much interest.

Other ways of measuring visitor interaction were available, however, such as the number of 'listens' to the listening posts. Detailed data on this was not available for this particular study but the installation on the shutter conservation, for example, received around 80,000 uses by visitors. Rooms where no stewards were usually present, such as the Billiard Room, also received high numbers of interactions on listening posts.



*Figure 11: The listening post with oral history recordings and current accounts of the unique Brodsworth mechanical shutters received high numbers of 'listens'.*

## 6.7 What could be done better on future projects

From an operational point of view, on the building conservation project itself, the consensus view among staff was that the actual work has 'gone very well':

There is a very little that we would change again because of the nature of the project...it's a conservation project. I don't think we would do things much differently. We might specify things a little more tightly, we might involve our maintenance team a little bit more than we have done (Int-6).

In terms of visitor interpretation and public engagement with the conservation project, this was very much a pilot and viewed as a creative, positive experience and one from which there is a much useful to learn for future projects. Staff, and volunteers, mentioned the need to communicate early and widely with messages and information about the project: online,

at the visitor centre, in social and other media, as well as in interpretation in the house. 'It's about the preparation really, and getting that message out there', 'You can never have too much information for people and you can never have too many pictures of what's going on' (Int-2, Int-4).

There was a sense of being slightly let down by the coverage on the English Heritage web site at the start of the project in 2016, which had little detail about what was happening: 'visitors were checking the website, reading about the conservation in action and they just weren't aware of the extent' (Int-2): 'I think there are things, particularly in the earlier months, that we could learn from and very much that was about messaging in terms of what the visitor is coming to see' (Int-6). Comments on TripAdvisor and Facebook also reflected this very specifically.

By the second year of the project, the web presence of the project was better developed and social media was being used actively. An effective strategy was to include responsibility for social media in the role of a new Collections Care Assistant specifically to be able to maximise impact, making regular posts with images and videos on Facebook and Twitter, 'she's had a positive response on those posts... they have been overwhelming positive' (Int-5).<sup>2</sup> Information whiteboards were updated daily as needed ('care assistants cleaning chandeliers in the drawing room... the drawing room carpet being washed') to tell visitors what, and where, work was currently going on. Interviewees in general perceived these initiatives as really successful and would have liked 'even more of that' (Int-4, Int-2).

Several staff remarked on the potential for doing more face-to-face engagement days with the public, with specialist groups, with volunteers and with staff (Int-3, Int-4, Int-5):

[more] specifically with contractors talking to people, which hasn't materialised as much as we would have like it to... more engagement with people making them feel they're getting a little bit behind the scenes. Access to objects and people and to work that's going on, that really makes a difference; and the same with staff and volunteers as well – staff open days (Int-4).

In particular, staff and volunteers in the front line of interacting with visitors emphasised the importance of ensuring visitors arriving were in no doubt about the experience of 'work in progress' that they could expect to encounter in the Hall;

There needed to have been something out at the front door, whether it was just 'bear with us' or something, there just needed to have been, yes, better interpretation (Int-11).

We've had visitors who, despite the sign by the visitor centre, despite being told when they show their tickets.. have come into the house and said 'oh, I don't like this' ... Perhaps a large banner by the gate? "Conservation in Action - see the work happening" ... Then people wouldn't have been so shocked (Int-9).

I think one of the things we could have done better in our marketing is being less afraid of putting very, very project heavy pictures in the marketing with the hoarding and the boards, which there was a certain reticence to do (Int-4).

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. the shutters conservation on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqrdKD9Jszw&t=2s> (over 3500 views)  
<https://www.facebook.com/brodsworthhallandgardens/posts/1772796089448702>

Internal communication, which was generally good with regular newsletter updates shared by the whole team - volunteers, staff and project contractors - was viewed as central to success in making sure the right messages reached visitors. Room stewards emphasised the importance of timely updates and that 'without our input, so many people could miss things'. The regular newsletter was useful but 'it's when you get these gaps, the Billiard Room window, they started work and got to a certain point and then everything stopped ... As much information as possible to stewards, we are on the front line and we are the ones who pass it on to people' (Int-8).

One of the volunteers was overheard telling visitors that he had no idea what was going on and he was pretty sure we hadn't been doing anything over the winter because it actually didn't look any different! We had a chat afterwards...(Int-2).

I would like, if we did it again, to have regular briefing... with the whole team, even if it's on the telephone for 10 minutes to say 'this is what's going on today', to engage the whole team about what's going on and excite them about it... because that will then get across to visitors (Int-3).

Overall, the sense from interviewees was that this has been a really successful and worthwhile project, challenging at times, which had certainly not run to plan initially but which in the second year had fully realised its potential as a pilot and created inventive and unexpected opportunities for visitor interactions. Interviewees described it as 'a great experience'. It has created real confidence that this kind of project could run again even more ambitiously with considerable advantage from what has been learned.



*Figure 12: Reinforcing messages about the continuing conservation need of the historic house and its landscape and its challenges*

## 7. Discussion

Discussion of the overall findings is presented here in the form of an impact ‘journey’ through *Caring for Brodsworth* from planning the project, to the reception of visitors and their experience through the house, encountering the issues and the responses of staff, visitors and volunteer stewards. This brings together the interesting, contrasting, and occasionally surprising, findings from the study about the impact of the project with reflections from the team on how future projects might be managed.

...the brief we got from the director level was very much, we keep the house open to the public, we’ve never done this before, it’s a large scale project, so let’s see how we get on. So the purpose of evaluating at the end is absolutely key (Int-6).

### 7.1 Impact of successful planning

Teamwork and the contribution of key personnel were identified frequently as critical to the overall planning of the operational aspects of the conservation programme (Appendix 2.5). The project team - i.e for the conservation works - together with the staff and volunteers at the property were generally recognised as ‘a brilliant team’ which worked exceptionally well together.

I really do think the success of the project is down to the team. They’ve been great. It’s been a complicated project which has had some very stressful moments (Int 6).

The difficult period in the first season, after the first appointed contractor went bankrupt, was not anticipated in planning - unsurprisingly. The impact of this on the visitor experience in the 2016 season was undoubtedly negative, as feedback shows clearly both from visitors and from the volunteers and staff who interacted directly with them in this period.

The delay also had the effect of pushing the majority of work to the rooms with complex conservation and operational factors into the open, visitor season. As originally planned, the project would have been completed over the winter closed period. Though unintended, this rescheduling stimulated a much more dynamic and inventive response from the team than might otherwise have been required.

Two key personnel were repeatedly identified as central to the success of the project: the project conservator and the contractor’s site manager. The project conservator was a key figure to ‘get that level of interaction’ and proactive management which allowed the ‘conservation in action’ element to be coordinated with the visitor experience and interpretation as opportunities arose. Thinking ahead to another, even more ambitious project now underway at Ironbridge, the EH national project manager observed that ‘an activities coordinator or conservation in action coordinator’ is an essential role to bridge between the operational aspects of the conservation programme and interactions with visitors (Int 6).

Brodsworth’s given us a good opportunity to use it as a case study - to really engage with operational requirements and the visitor experience (Int-6).



[We were] blessed to have a project team based at the site and having a project conservator who's there on site every day, backed up by two collections care assistants, has worked really well with a project of that complexity (Int-5).

There are clearly distinct roles in the combined team: both curatorial responsibilities, leading on 'the interpretation and the presentation of the house and the collection during the project' (Int-4) and operational responsibilities for the planning and undertaking of the conservation project itself. Combining planning for the 'conservation in action' of the house and conservation of collections was a dynamic process: 'things we wanted to do but then things that would fit, opportunistically':

For example, when the shutters were being prepared in the drawing room, all of the furniture had to be moved out anyway, which provides the rare opportunity that the drawing carpet is fully accessible, so that's the time to wash and clean and photograph it. And [with the Lawrence painting in the dining room] it was the perfect time, the painting would be out of the way while the work was underway which again gave a lovely chance to install some interpretation ... [plus] watching the painting being rehung (Int-4).

Maybe that's been part of the success of the project, that those things just developed.. If we'd planned that at the beginning would that have been the same? ... The fact it's been fluid comes back to the fact we have had a brilliant team.. able to think on their feet and get things done (Int-6).

The success of the key partnership with the contractor was clearly the result of a well-planned selection process and was mentioned many times during interviews. In the tendering process they were 'carefully selected for their skills and for being able to talk to visitors... it's a big part of the interview'. The contractor's readiness to work with the team, to following 'best practice guidance and trying different materials' was commended, 'we've had the right contractors and that's been a great success'(Int-3):

in our contract for Brodsworth we have twelve days which the contractors priced for originally [for interacting with visitors and] we set out clearly what we expect from them in the tender process ... formal talks, show-and-tell type of thing to ... just allowing the public to watch what you are doing, interact as you're working, just chatter (Int 6).

More planned opportunities for interaction would have been welcomed, and more open days for different audiences were suggested. Seizing the opportunities as they did come up evidently required some fleetness of foot and some were unexpected. Other aspects could have been better embedded in project planning: good systems for 'newsfeed' to volunteers and front of house staff were shown to be important for effective coordination and communication about these. Equally an integrated communications plan for highlighting the project via the website, social and other media could have been effective in mitigating some of the unintended 'shock' discussed next.

## **7.2 Impact of arrival at the Hall 'the shock of the new': managing expectations**

For the visiting public, the idea of 'behind the scenes' tours of heritage sites and demonstrations of conservation in action is not new and has been developed for some decades in museums and galleries (Koutromanou 2017). At National Trust properties like Croome Park, Knole and Allan Bank, innovative approaches to opening up conservation



projects have also been successful. But for a whole historic house to remain open during major conservation works, with sensitive interiors under wraps, was a bold decision. 'We wanted to make no apology' (Int-5) was a common theme in interviews but there were tensions in this: 'We had a conflict between that "we make no apology" and some volunteers and staff going "I'm really sorry the house is in such a mess" (Int-6).

The impact for visitors of arriving in the entrance hall once the conservation project had started was undoubtedly significant. It was 'potentially quite shocking' and some visitors 'liked, some didn't like, but [they] seemed more ok with it when someone had explained it to them and they got familiar with the idea' (Int-4, Int-6). For a very few people it was apparently 'almost claustrophobic ... quite enclosed, a couple of people on the taster tour have said "can we go out it's a bit oppressive"' and 'it was difficult to motivate people to want to come in' (Int-9, Int-10). Negative visitor comments, particularly on TripAdvisor and Facebook, illustrate how it felt to many (above p.17).



*Figure 13 : Brodsworth entrance hall July 2017 with protective hoarding in place (viewing 'window' just visible on the left).*

The intention to shock was deliberate and intended to encourage a new way of thinking about Brodsworth Hall as a curated, carefully conserved ensemble. But, critically, the delay to the start of works and limited communication about the project meant that, at first, there was little advance warning of the experience visitors could expect; and none of the interest that 'conservation in action' would have offered them was available in the first season. The team's response to this in the second season was undoubtedly successful though clearly there is still work to do here, and a small thread of negative responses persists through TripAdvisor reviews even in the second season.

Suggested **strategies for managing expectations** better to ensure a positive reception and impact came from all parts of the team.

I think we would be more confident and not apologetic [next time] about what we're doing. And that we would broadcast it more widely and make it clearer to everybody what it is that we're doing. (Int-5)

Because it really was all about we're proud of the work we're doing. We're proud of the fact that your membership is letting us do this and that was the key message, and that's never really come through [as planned] (Int-6).

Building the positive messages into the visitor journey, before their arrival and throughout the visit, came across in many suggestions and was reflected in the adaptations and activities successfully trialled during the project:

- unambiguous information and engaging videos and images on website
- impactful visual interpretation and signage at the reception/ticketing area
- consistent friendly explanations of what to expect from the ticket sale point
- emphasising what's special about the visit (every visit is different, what's on today)
- offering a short (re)orientation video and talks on site (in a tent on the lawn?)
- reinforcing positive communications in tours and with stewards one-to-one
- making maximum opportunity to share *any* conservation activity going on
- dual interpretation stories and activities for adults and children
- and repeated messaging at all available points.

Installing the illustrated hoarding by the tea room where visitors spend time and can be engaged, for example, was an inspired idea.

Whether people took it all in before coming to the Hall is potentially doubtful. Some come up and go straight into the tea-rooms or walk round the gardens and then they go into the Hall and they might have forgotten [what they had been told] (Int4).

Stewards observed the importance of 'whoever's by the front door [being] someone who is willing to explain what people are looking at... some are more proactive with engaging the visitors, others are more reactive' (Int-8). Managing expectations person to person was clearly one of the most effective ways to transform attitudes. The commonest theme in positive feedback comments was the friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff and volunteers, with a correlation between this and comments reflecting appreciative understanding of the *Caring for Brodsworth* project.

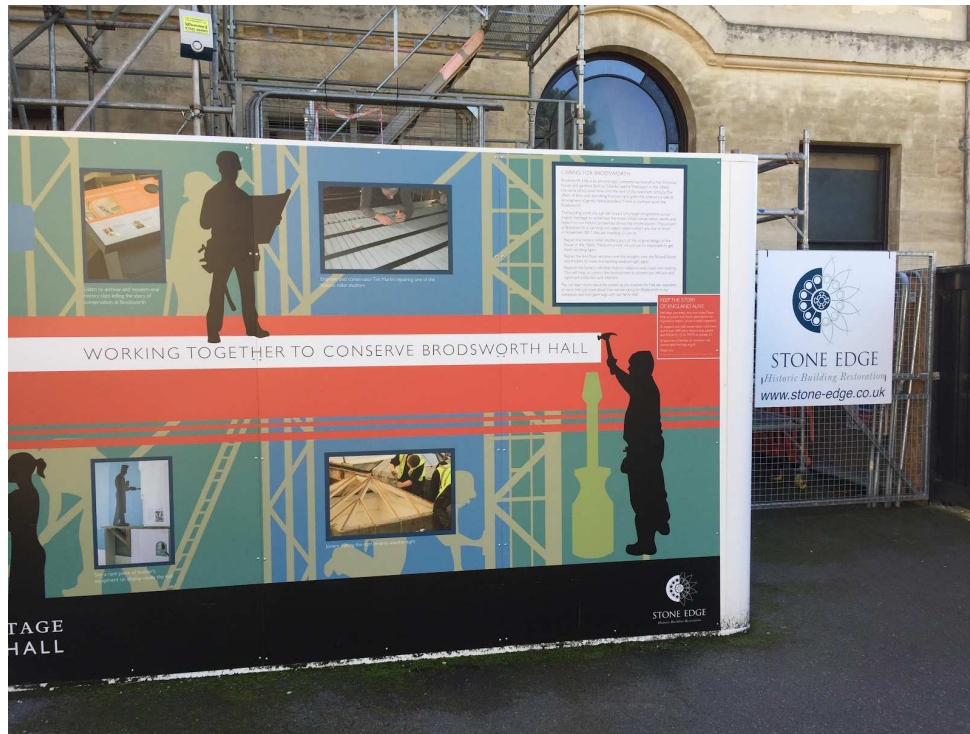


Figure 14: Using the hoarding around the work area by the tea room was a well-used opportunity for messages about the work of the conservation team.

Absolutely essential to safeguard the fabric of the building and the artefacts requires the sensitive expertise of our English Heritage work people for future generations. The dedicated care by those employed and who are volunteers is evident at every turn during our visit (review #780 April 2017).

### 7.3 Impact of experiencing the project as visitors

It has proved difficult to distinguish in the data here the separate impact on visitors of the *Caring for Brodsworth* interpretation scheme and the 'conservation in action' element of the project. Clearly visitors experienced these as a whole. Overall, visitor comments reflect a **strongly positive experience with over 85% making supportive and constructive comments** in social media, and an even higher proportion in comment cards in the Hall. Two aspects of impact are highlighted here.

Firstly, the data available for this study was not designed to evaluate **the impact of particular strategies or installations**. For example, the impact of the oral history recordings and explanation of the shutter mechanics (not mentioned) and the 'dog pee' installation (only 4 mentions and 50:50 mixed) which were piloted in the interpretation cannot really be evaluated from visitor data. The impact of the 'knitted bugs', however, stands out as evidently positive and particularly engaging for younger visitors, which speaks to its effectiveness.

Most surprising is the absence of specific mentions of the 'conservation in action' activities from the majority of feedback. It is clear from staff/volunteer observation that visitors found these very engaging and they invited close and interested attention and yet they are

extremely rarely mentioned on the comment cards or in online feedback (chandelier and carpet cleaning get single mentions). The exception is the limited data from the visitor survey where activities ongoing at the time of individual visits is noted. Here there is some correlation apparently between positive and insightful comments and the fact that a conservation activity was going on.

Visitor reactions to this work can be inferred from the high number of positive ‘interesting’ and ‘fascinating’ comments in feedback and often these are connected to comments on the friendly and informative volunteers and staff. These may be stewards or conservators. One of the strongest messages is that talking to people, one-to-one or one-to-many, and interactions with people working on the house has very positive impacts and capacity to change an unappreciated experience into a worthwhile one.

Secondly, for **impact on the longer term educational and charitable aims** of English Heritage as a charity, ‘conversions’ are as important as affirmative responses from the already-converted. Particularly interesting in the overall feedback, which was on the whole rather generalised, is the degree to which visitors said they had gained knowledge and new insights about conservation which increased their appreciation of the work of the organisation and of what conservation is about. The fact that some visitors engaged in a debate about conservation and restoration in their comments, or simply showed awareness that those are differently understood, has been an excellent outcome and one on which to build in the Brodsworth story.

Cultivating a more informed and knowledgeable audience who are advocates for the organisation’s work (as seen on Facebook) is a valuable outcome. Another meaningful aspect which might be explored further is whether enhancing visitors’ broader understanding about managing cultural heritage makes a difference to sustained support. Like managing natural heritage, it is about understanding the risks to the historic environment, the consequences of change and the cost of mitigating losses. The limited visitor survey feedback is no more than indicative but suggests the *Caring for Brodsworth* experience would encourage a majority to donate to support English Heritage's work and that doing this on site - i.e. it is place-sensitive - was favoured.

Further research into both of these areas could be designed to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of attitudinal change and support for the English Heritage’s charitable purpose.

#### 7.4 Impact of managing a project in action

In interviews about the experience of managing the project, it is evident this unfolded in ways that were not, and could not be, entirely planned. The ability of the team to see opportunities and to be confident about sharing them with visitors grew over the two seasons:

Initially at the beginning, the more mundane tasks we were doing in the morning... as the project has progress things like putting the furniture back, we’ve just thought ‘well, people can watch us moving the ottoman and looking at our documentation photographs and working out which table goes where’ (Int-5).

The effectiveness of the way the team worked in this project seems to have been fundamental to its successful completion, despite the initial bumpy start with the delayed contract. Thinking about the changes introduced as the project developed (section 6.2), interviewees highlighted the responsive way in which the curatorial and the project team adapted and creatively enhanced the experience of the project for visitors, bringing more and more activity into the public domain. The unplanned rescheduling of the programme, which meant it fell across a full visitor season, provided more opportunities than had been envisaged. Overall there is a body of new experience now, which can be built on to make more use, for example, of the contractors as a local 'voice' in conservation practice:

the joiners and decorators, are really good specialists, very experienced at working on historic buildings. I think we could have done more on ...showcasing these skills, [that was] probably a missed opportunity.... Because we're dependent on these skills going forward, especially the local [aspect] as most of the contractors are fairly local (Int-3).

Conducting this programme of work as 'conservation in action', with the house fully open to the public, has had some impact in terms of negative feedback (though overall visitor figures do not seem to be adversely affected) and in terms of a significantly positive new interest and appreciation of both the property and English Heritage's work. It will also have had an impact on the time and costs of the programme itself, the subject of internal review:

One of the things as an organisation that we wanted to understand was from a cost point of view, was it beneficial that we kept the house open, so commercially, operationally, the income that we get from a visitor, did that outweigh the cost to the actual project? ...One the exercises we are doing alongside other bits of evaluation is very much about cost (Int-6).

Evaluating this balance is an interesting question since the 'value' of the visitor experience, as enhanced or indeed adversely affected by the project, has a dimension that is difficult to monetise. The results of the small visitor survey are suggestive and a part of longer term work here might be to look critically at this aspect.

## 8. Potential for future projects and research

A number of recommendations and directions in which future projects of this kind might develop are identified from this impact study. Several avenues are briefly highlighted here for their future potential.

**Designing impact evaluation** into future projects, from the outset, to focus on specific aims would be much more effective and also thinking about collecting longitudinal data that would allow more fine grain analysis about trends and changes.

This pilot project shows that:

- The positioning of the visitor feedback point(s) in the property is crucial. More nuanced feedback on the effectiveness of specific installations or interpretation, for example, is best sought close to the location where it is sited. Metrics from interactive installations suggest these could be used more strategically and more widely to gauge interest.

- For younger audiences, there would be value in designing specific and engaging feedback opportunities for children linked to creative and interactive methods. Other audiences deserve serious attention with further research into the demographic at individual sites. Are there ways in which ‘conservation in action’ can reach fresh audiences and be designed better to be accessible and appeal to other groups?
- Sustaining the feedback though into the period after a project is completed would enable further evaluation of the longer term benefits (or not) in visitor experience.

**Orientation for visitors** is imperative at the outset of their visit to manage expectations and to convey the right messages (for historic houses in particular) to re-orientate the imagined ‘country-house visit’, attuned to the different narratives of each property’s story.

Understanding the psychology of a visit better so that ‘conservation in action’ is represented as unique opportunity (rather than a missed one) can pave the way for sharing the complexity of decisions and choices made in the public interest.

Short film orientation and time-lapse imagery has been effective at other properties to foreground conservation work: this can be temporary, e.g. in a covered outside area, tent, or mobile, with serendipitous ‘pop up’ screens where most effective. It has the advantage that visitors can start their visit with a common introduction and are all offered ‘extra’, added-value experiences, not normally available. Video cam footage, as used for social media, can add a dimension to appreciation of work that is otherwise unseen.

Understanding the **impact of new understanding about conservation** more deeply will be a fruitful area to investigate. Insights into what conservation is about and the work that English Heritage does were clearly a revelation for many visitors and prompted positive responses and repeat visits. How does this change attitudes and have longer term consequences: e.g. recruit support for heritage conservation, bring young people into the sector, attract new people in to volunteer? From an organisational perspective, how can this fresh appreciation be harnessed effectively to attract donations and sustain membership?

Developing **links with construction skills and building trades** to showcase traditional methods and materials would be an obvious next step with traditional building trades and conservators working on the site. Opportunities for hands-on experience, demonstrations of craft practice relevant for the work going on - e.g. how to repair a timber sash window, or repoint masonry, mixing traditional mortars. Workshops and ‘behind the scenes’ tours can offer more added-value for visitors, bringing additional/ repeat visits. Feedback from this project shows compellingly that wherever *people* are engaged in doing things, and ready to be observed and explain their work, visitors are immediately engaged too.

The **Brodsworth story** is a special one in terms of the approach taken to conservation of its interiors and collections. As one of the interviewees expressed it:

It shows the entirety of life in the house from when it was first built up until when the last resident, Sylvia, died and that’s what makes it special: that relatively little has left [the house] and nothing has been added that is not related specifically to the house and collection. So it’s the ensemble as a whole that makes it special (In-4).



This carefully managed ensemble has demanded a particular approach to its conservation which governs day-to-day decisions and operations as well as longer term strategic choices. There is scope for an in-depth research project here, working with English Heritage and involving visitors in those careful choices, to explore ways to work this creatively into visitors' experience and involve them explicitly and interactively in the fascinating process of *Caring for Brodsworth*.

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